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Removing Homosexuality from Sodom: Contextualizing Genesis 19 with Other Biblical Rape Narratives

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REMOVING HOMOSEXUALITY FROM SODOM:
CONTEXTUALIZING GENESIS 19 WITH OTHER BIBLICAL RAPE NARRATIVES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Master of Humanities

BY

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY H.R. Downey ENTITLED Removing Homosexuality from Sodom: Contextualizing Genesis 19 with Other Biblical Rape Narratives BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Humanities.

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ABSTRACT

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Removing Homosexuality from Sodom: Contextualizing Genesis 19 with Other
Biblical Rape Narratives.

This analysis disputes common interpretations that the Sodom narrative (Genesis 19) is an anti-homosexual story by presenting it as part of a four-story arc about rape in the Bible. The three other stories discussed in addition to Sodom are as follows: the gang rape of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34), and the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Each of the four stories discussed in this analysis contain various types of sexual violence, such as male-to-male rape or attempted rape, female-to-male rape, and male-to-female rape; in each case, the rapes or attempted rapes lead to disastrous social consequences, which this analysis concludes is the overarching message to each of the four narratives. In addition, this analysis will consider how the Sodom narrative became incorrectly associated with homosexuality and the negative impact that this misinterpretation in American jurisprudence and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community.

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CHAPTER 1: WHY ISN'T THE SODOM NARRATIVE ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY, AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

OVERVIEW

This opening chapter has three major goals. The first goal is to summarize how the common interpretation that the Sodom narrative (Genesis 19) is an anti-homosexual story is not only incorrect, but it is also damaging because it has historically affected—and continues to affect—the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. The second goal is to emphasize that Sodom is one part of multiple Biblical narratives involving a rape motif—not a standalone story warning why homosexuality is “wrong.” The third goal is to recontextualize Sodom as a rape narrative by placing it alongside three other Biblical narratives about rape.

To accomplish these goals, this chapter is arranged into four major sections. In the first, the Sodom narrative is summarized (an in-depth analysis of the narrative will be provided in subsequent chapters). The second section includes a background discussion on how misreading Sodom influences American jurisprudence, religious communities, and academia. This discussion summarizes the widespread consequences for LGBT individuals connected to misreading the narrative. The third

section provides a brief literature review of select academic writings, which highlights various strengths and weaknesses in academic discourse about Sodom. Finally, the fourth section concludes that Sodom is actually an anti-rape narrative that ought to be read within the context of other Biblical stories about rape. Three other rape narratives are quickly identified and summarized, with further analysis to follow in the forthcoming chapters.

THE SODOM NARRATIVE: SUMMARY¹

Genesis 19 is one of the most controversial Biblical narratives. In this story, Lot the nephew of Abraham is in the city of Sodom and takes in two angels of God for the night (Genesis 19:1-3)². When the angels get to his house, the men of Sodom surround Lot's house and demand that he bring out the angels so they could "be intimate with them" (19:4-5). Lot refuses, offering the men his virgin daughters in lieu of his guests; the furious mob attempts to break down the door, and the angels prevent the mob from entering and tells Lot to collect his family and run, because God would obliterate the city due to the townspeople's wickedness (19:6-14). The city is destroyed the next morning as Lot and his family narrowly escapes (19:23-25).

Due to the demand of male-to-male sex in v. 5, the Sodom narrative is commonly misinterpreted as verification that same-sex relations offend God, which has led to discrimination against LGBT individuals. Scholars consistently dispute that Sodom's sin had anything to do with homosexuality; several correctly identify the demand for male-on-male sex in v. 5 as rape— which is motivated by violence, not

¹ Refer to chapter 2 for a more in depth analysis of the Sodom narrative.

² All Biblical references are from *The Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation*. See bibliography for full citation.

sexual desire. This thesis argues that the Sodom narrative has nothing to with homosexuality, but rather it is one of several Biblical narratives that demonstrate disastrous consequences to rape. The Sodom narrative portrays male-on-male rape as a strategic tool for forcing power over another group, to which ancient Israelite society was particularly susceptible.

BACKGROUND

The Sodom narrative is controversial because modern readers have interpreted the narrative by placing the focus on the men of Sodom's demand in v. 5 to "be intimate" with the two male angels. Sodom has thus been historically associated with same-sex sexual behavior and same-sex relationships; furthermore, since Sodom is portrayed as a city that is so horrifically sinful that God annihilated it, such readers have accordingly associated same-sex sexual behavior and same-sex relationships as sinful. How the term "sodomy" specifically became associated with homosexuality will be discussed at length later;³ for now, the proceeding paragraphs will focus on the ramifications of associating the Sodom narrative with anti-homosexuality.

Associating Sodom's sin with homosexuality has been problematic for contemporary readers who are part of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Community and those who are acquainted with and/or supportive of said Community. Feminist scholar Holly Joan Toesing summarizes this problem with the following:

³ See chapter 4.

Associating [Sodom] with homosexuality is common among the Christian Right. More specifically, many associate God's annihilation of [Sodom] with the idea that the men of [Sodom] were gay, engaging in sodomy. Verbal expressions of this association are used against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals at rallies or functions. For example, one might see slogans such as "Homosexuality = Death (Gen. 19)" or "God Hates Fags (Gen. 19:24-25)" written on placards held high by Christian Right groups protesting a gay and lesbian pride parade. (Toesing 61).

Michael Carden adds to Toesing's explanation by pointing out that associating Sodom's sin with homosexuality is "misleading" and "serve[s] to maintain Christian homophobic discourse" that in turn "generates homophobia" amongst religious practitioners (83-84).

Toesing goes on to say that some Biblical scholars also associate Sodom's sin with homosexuality, citing Weston Fields' description of the so-called "sex-crazed homosexually inclined male population of Sodom" and Robert Alter's claim that Sodom is "a society that rejects the moral bonds of civilization for the instant gratification of dark urges can be swept away in a moment" (61-62). Although Biblical scholarship does not promote active objections against the LGBT Community per se, this is no less harmful because said academic discourse can potentially supplement religious homophobic discourse.

Associating Sodom's sin with homosexuality has also influenced the justice system. For example, until mid-2003, various American states had laws on their books that criminalized consensual sexual relationships between two same-sex adults. These

laws, commonly referred to as “sodomy laws” (a direct reference to the Sodom narrative), were broadly defined in American jurisprudence as both homosexual and heterosexual non-procreative sexual acts (e.g., oral and anal sex) and also to bestiality (Scheb and Scheb 185). Although the jurisdiction of the laws went beyond homosexuality, the enforcement of said laws was less broad. George Chauncey explains that sodomy laws “effectively criminalized all lesbians and gay men” because “opponents of gay rights” often used these laws to deny gays and lesbians certain freedoms such as military service and child custody (Chauncey 509). Chauncey went on to say that these laws “were an ideological cornerstone in the legal edifice of antigay discrimination” (509).

Sodomy laws were effectively turned over by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) on June 26, 2003 in the case of *Lawrence v. Texas* (Lawrence v. Texas 577–579); this decision overturned a 1986 SCOTUS decision from the case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which sustained a Georgia decree against so-called “sodomy” (Chauncey 509). Chauncey explains:

Ahistorical assumptions about the unchanging character both of homosexuality and of hostility to homosexuality had undergirded the *Bowers* decision. As many observers noted at the time, the majority in *Bowers* treated Georgia’s sodomy law as if it applied only to homosexual conduct, when in fact it also prohibited oral or anal sex between men and women and between married as well as unmarried couples. This astonishing misreading of the statute under review was linked to the majority’s misreading of the entire history of sodomy laws as distinctly anti-homosexual measures, which Chief Justice Warren

Burger, in a famous concurring opinion, claimed had the sanction of “millennia of moral teaching” against homosexual conduct. His error was not unusual. In the common parlance of the 1980s (and of today), most people, not just the chief justice, assumed that sodomy laws referred only to homosexual conduct, even though most of them did not—and in fact could have been used to imprison millions of happily married heterosexuals. (Chauncey 510)

Chauncey implies that the laws’ focus on homosexuality comes from homophobic ideologies. Whereas he claims that this interpretation of these laws was a “misread”—which, as mentioned previously, it was—the fact that the legal system even made this “misread” speaks volumes of how the concept of “sodomy” has been historically understood.

Although Sodomy laws were struck down in 2003, change in religious attitudes toward the LGBT Community has been slow. The following February, then-President George W. Bush announced his endorsement for a constitutional amendment that would legally define marriage as exclusively between one man and one woman (“Bush Calls for Ban” para. 1). This proposed amendment would have negated same-sex marriage licenses that had already been honored in Massachusetts and the city of San Francisco (para. 2). Bush explained, “The union of a man and a woman is the most enduring human institution, honored and encouraged in all cultures and *by every religious faith*” (paras. 2 and 4, emphasis added). Just seven months following the landmark *Lawrence*, this announcement put American gays and lesbians in yet another legal battle pertaining to their intimate relationships—and once again, religious ideology that invalidates same-sex relationships supported this proposal.

The same-sex marriage debate in American jurisprudence eventually culminated in a SCOTUS decision on June 26, 2015—twelve years after *Lawrence* and eleven years after Bush’s announcement—in which previous state legislation that forbade same-sex couples from marriage was overturned (*Obergefell v. Hodges* 1-2). This groundbreaking decision prompted celebration from LGBT supporters, but religious objection came from others. In July 2015, an openly conservative Christian clerk in Kentucky named Kim Davis was cited for contempt of the court for refusing to grant same-sex couples marriage licenses (Ortiz et al. paras. 1-3). Thus the pattern of religious objection to LGBT relationships has withstood legal victories.

The preceding discussion of the social and political ramifications of religious objections to homosexuality illustrates how interpreting the Sodom narrative as an anti-homosexual story exacerbates a complex and recurring tendency to assume homosexuality as immoral and potentially detrimental to society. It depends on a recurring ideology that homosexuality is against God’s will and thus will put a society that tolerates it in harm’s way. These issues will be revisited in more detail in chapter 4. Until then, this thesis will limit its focus to the source of the Sodom narrative itself: the Bible.

The purpose of this thesis is to not only call attention to this harmful outcome of misinterpreting Sodom, but to also reinterpret Sodom in light of its relationship to the larger context of Biblical narratives—not as a standalone story, as it often is. Whereas Sodom is sometimes compared alongside specific narratives (namely Judges 19) for other purposes, rarely has any scholar discussed Sodom in terms of its

relationship to the remainder of the Hebrew Bible—that is, the anthology in which it is placed. In the next section, let us turn our attention to previous academic discussions of Sodom and how these discussions are built upon with this thesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whereas scholars have consistently argued against the idea that Sodom is an anti-homosexual narrative, there are still some scholars who continue to stress that it is. For example, Robert Gagnon refers to homosexuality as an “abomination” in the Sodom narrative (58). He cites Ezekiel 16:49-50,⁴ in which Sodom is referenced as a city that committed “abominations before [God],” which he claims Ezekiel interprets “in the light of the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse” (58). He says that Ezekiel shows strong ties to the Holiness Code (i.e., Leviticus 17-26, which discuss guidelines to living a holy life—hence the name “Holiness Code”), which names male-to-male sex as an “abomination” (Leviticus 18:22)⁵ (58). Gagnon provides no direct analysis of the Sodom narrative itself, only indirectly through citing Ezekiel’s reference to Sodom.

There are two major problems with Gagnon’s assessment. First, it is a stretch to say that Ezekiel is referring to male-to-male intercourse. Louis Crompton explains this divergence the best: “Ezekiel names no sexual offenses, only sins against charity. Sodom is a city of men who whose wealth makes them proud, luxurious, and idle and

⁴ Ezekiel 16:49-50: “Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before Me; and so I removed them, as you saw.” In context, Sodom is referenced in comparison to Jerusalem, which was conquered by the Babylonians prior to Ezekiel’s prophecy.

⁵ Leviticus 18:22: “Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence.” This is sometimes translated as “abomination,” which is the translation Gagnon favors.

who remain indifferent to the plight of the poor” (Crompton 37). Compton goes on to say that in Ezekiel’s time and for some time following, the idea that Sodom was a city of excess and selfishness was pervasive, to the point of making it into some early Talmudic literature (postbiblical writings discussing laws and doctrines) (37-38).

Crompton’s counterargument shows that Gagnon’s interpretation of Ezekiel’s Sodom reference is out of context. Gagnon is assuming that Sodom is synonymous with homosexuality, which is something Crompton says early church leaders eventually promoted as the default interpretation (37). Thus while Gagnon’s association is congruent with modern understandings of Sodom, this interpretation does not necessarily come from the text itself, but rather from theological tradition.

Second, the fact that Gagnon fails to provide a direct analysis of the Sodom narrative is problematic because relying on a secondary interpretation rather than the primary source removes the story from its original context and places it in the framework of someone else’s version of the story. Put simply, this is comparable to trying to draw conclusions about a film’s themes by reading summaries of the film rather than actually *watching* the film. Whereas connecting Ezekiel’s use of the term “abomination” to the Levitical Law against male-to-male sex in Leviticus 18 is valid, his argument is unfounded because he is ignoring the Sodom narrative itself.

Whereas Gagnon directly names homosexuality as Sodom’s sin, not all scholars who associate Sodom with homosexuality are so straightforward in their assumption. Robert Alter does not condemn homosexuality as inherently immoral *per se*, instead focusing on what he considers to be the text’s assumed social consequences of homosexual sex. He writes, “in the larger story of progeny [e.g., offspring] for

[Abraham], it is surely important that homosexuality is a necessarily sterile form of sexual intercourse, as though the proclivities of the Sodomites answered biologically to their utter indifference to the moral prerequisite for survival” (Alter 33, cf. Toesing 61). He goes on to say that underlying messages of the story is that “the very danger of illicit sexuality may blight a kingdom with sterility” (Alter 36). The issue here is not necessarily homosexuality itself, but rather that homosexual intercourse fails to generate offspring.

From a historical perspective, Alter’s argument makes sense. In pre-industrialized, agricultural ancient societies children were crucial for not only the survival of familial groups (i.e., family lineage), but also to provide the family’s labor force (i.e., more children = more “hands” to help the family work) (Stienstra 76). Logically the number of offspring in this context reflects not only individual family wealth, but also the overall strength of the society in which the family belonged (i.e., more people = more political, economic, and military strength for the community).

Homosexual relations are, following this reproductive-centered logic, a disruption of these benefits because if men turn to each other for sex rather than to women, this hurts chances for offspring to produce. A reproductive-centered attitude is present in other parts of Biblical literature (e.g., Genesis 1:28; Genesis 38:8-10; Psalm 127: 4-5), so Alter’s argument in this sense is valid because it is congruent with other Biblical themes.

It is misleading to exclusively focus on ancient sexuality’s procreative standards, as Biblical literature confirms that ancient Israelites were just as prone to erotic desire as we are today (e.g., Song of Songs). However, even though the ancients

expressed the same erotic urges as people today, they had a much different outlook on sexuality than we do. Today, sexuality is considered an innate part of one's identity that is generally categorized in many different orientations (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, etc.). The concept of sexual orientation, however, was not understood in antiquity as it is today. Johnathan Katz explains that while heterosexual desire itself has been present since the dawn of time, "the idea of heterosexuality is a modern invention" and it had a "pivotal place in the social universe of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that it did not inhabit earlier" (Katz 55-56). Katz's claim is supported by the fact that the term "homosexuality" was never even used until 1869, when a German pamphlet used the term *homosexualität* to designate two persons of the same sex engaging in sexual activity (Mondimore 3).

The concepts of "heterosexual" and "homosexual" are a radical change from ancient standards, where the lines between desiring a man versus a woman were not as clear-cut. For example, in ancient Greece, sexual desire for the same sex was not understood as distinct from desire of the opposite sex (Foucault 190). Although it is possible that preference toward a particular gender influenced one's choosing of sex partners (190), this does not indicate the same definitive categories of "heterosexual" or "homosexual" as it would be labeled today.

The problem with this sexuality discussion, however, is that focusing on the "sexual" aspect of Sodom ignores the larger issue in the text. J. Harold Ellens says Lot is not worried about the fact that the mob wants sex; his only concern is protecting his guests (Ellens xv, 107-108). He says the mob's insistence that Lot hands over his guests for sexual abuse violates social expectations of hospitality, not sexual morality

(xv-xvi, 107-108). This idea is supported by *The Oxford Bible Commentary's* discussion of Genesis, where R.N. Whybray comments that the text prioritizes Lot's duty to uphold good hospitality customs over any other moral or ethical concerns (Whybray 53).

Gnuse adds to this conversation about the role hospitality standards plays in the Sodom narrative. He explains:

The sin of the men in [Sodom] is compounded by their violation of the customs of hospitality (Fields: 54–67; Conon: 17–40). Strangers who visit a city are to be taken in and given shelter and food, as was done by . . . Lot. In fact, by the code of honor in that era, [Lot is] duty bound to protect [his] guests with [his life]. Conservative commentators who disdain the argument of hospitality by saying it is too mild a sin to merit the condemnation that Sodom receives, fail to appreciate the magnitude of this moral requirement of hospitality in ancient Israel. This obligation to the principles of hospitality means being ready to die to protect your guests, and that is why [Lot makes] the drastic offer of the women to the raging crowd. (Gnuse 73)

Gnuse goes on to say that Lot's actions may have been particularly offensive to Sodom's men because he is not even a citizen of Sodom yet he still offers hospitality to the two men (73). Lot makes the rest of the men of Sodom look bad for his good deeds.

The downside to scholarly focus on Sodom's inhospitality is that the idea being cordial to guests still does not explain why Lot—not to mention God—objected to Sodom's actions so strongly. It is clear that Lot wants to protect his guests, but the

hospitality argument ignores what he wants to protect his guests *from*. Even with hospitality expectations bearing down on Lot's shoulders, his actions go beyond deontological enthusiasm. His words in v. 7 indicate desperation ("I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong"); furthermore, his attempt to barter his daughters in v. 8 reinforces his desperation.

The fact that Lot is willing to sacrifice his own family to guard his guests indicates that this situation is serious enough for Lot to go to extreme measures. Therefore, it is not enough to say that Lot wanted to protect his guests; the situation appears to be far too serious to write this off as a case of bad manners. Something is very wrong here, and understanding that "wrong" is therefore the key element in this story.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE RAPE: SODOM AND OTHER STORIES

Gnuse correctly identifies the key wrong of Sodom as "rape or attempted rape" (Gnuse 73). He says the rape in Genesis 19:4-5 "has nothing to do with homosexuality between free consenting adults in a loving relationship" (73). Other scholars echo Gnuse. Carden says that in ancient days, the act of a man sexually penetrating another man was understood as "an aggressive act demonstrating the superiority of the active to the passive partner" (Carden 90). Thus, the problem is the desire to exert power over the victims (89-90). Sodom's men were not seeking a homosexual orgy; they wanted to rape the houseguests in an act of hostility. Also, Susan Niditch points out that male-on-male rape was a major threat to ancient Israelite men, who lived a nomadic lifestyle and were thus vulnerable to attack (Niditch 190). She says threat is

particularly insulting because male-to-male rape “womanizes” the victim; this is present in other (non-rape) Biblical narratives (e.g., Samson in Judges 16:19, 21; Sisera in Judges 4:27) (190).

This builds upon the idea that rape⁶ is the key element to understanding Sodom. Consideration of other issues discussed in the previous section’s literature review (i.e., human sexuality, ancient vs. contemporary standards of sex, hospitality) are important and may be addressed at some point; however, the major focus will be to analyze the role rape plays in the story. To do this, the Sodom narrative will be discussed alongside three other Bible stories in which rape is also the key element: the story of the Levite in Gibeah (Judges 19), the story of Dinah (Genesis 34), and the story of Tamar (2 Samuel 13). By placing the Sodom narrative in the context of these three other narratives, this thesis hopes to transform Sodom from a standalone narrative that allegedly “proves” the moral implications of homosexuality into a part of a larger Biblical story arc that shows the negative consequences of rape and attempted rape.

*The Gibeah Narrative: Judges 19*⁷

The Gibeah narrative is similar to the Sodom narrative, both in structure and in outcome. In fact, the two stories are so similar that scholars often discuss the narratives in tandem (see Carden; Gnuse; Frymer-Kensky); for this reason, this thesis will also discuss them in tandem. The majority of the story centers on a traveling

⁶ The term “rape” in this thesis will be defined as when one or more person or persons force another person to engage in non-consensual penetrative sexual acts, such as forced vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse. This is based on how the FBI currently defines rape, in which the two crucial factors are lack of consent and penetration (“Frequently Asked Questions” 1). Although the Bible never describes in detail the exact nature of each rape, this thesis will assume that each rape will involve the forced penetration of either a vagina or an anus with at least one penis.

⁷ Refer to chapter 2 for a more in depth analysis of the Gibeah narrative.

Levite and his unnamed concubine. Originally from Ephraim, the Levite leaves home because his concubine ran away and was staying with her family in Bethlehem (Judges 19:2). After he convinces her to return to him, they head back for Ephraim (v. 10). They stop in Gibeah for the night and are granted shelter in a local resident's home (vv. 11-21).

Gibeah's townspeople—the Benjaminites—show up at the old man's house and demand that the old man “bring out” the Levite “so that we can be intimate with him” (v. 22). The old man suggests that the crowd accepts his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine instead (vv. 23-24). When the Benjaminites refuse, the Levite shoves his concubine outside to them; they gang rape and abuse her until dawn (v. 25). When the Levite leaves the next morning, he finds the concubine unresponsively lying at the threshold (vv. 26-28). He cuts her corpse into twelve fragments and scatters the pieces throughout Israel, which stirs outrage against Benjaminites (vv. 28-30). Eventually, this causes a civil war to break out in Israel, in which the Benjaminites are nearly annihilated (20:14-48).

*Dinah: Genesis 34*⁸

The Dinah narrative is set two generations after the Sodom narrative, taking place during the time of Jacob (a descendant of Abraham, Lot's uncle). In Genesis 34, Jacob and his family lived in the land of Canaan (34:1). One day, his only daughter Dinah decided to leave home to visit the women in the village; while she is out, Shechem the son of Hamor (i.e., chief of the country) saw Dinah and “took her and lay

⁸ Refer to chapter 3 for an in depth analysis of the Dinah narrative.

with her by force” (vv. 1-2). After the rape, Shechem, who was “in love” with Dinah, requests her hand in marriage, which their respective fathers quickly arrange (vv. 3-8).

When Dinah’s thirteen brothers learn what happened to their sister, they are furious (vv. 5-8). They tell Hamor they cannot intermarry because neither they nor the men in the town are circumcised; thus all the townsmen are circumcised to allow this marriage to take place (vv. 9-24). Three days after the circumcisions, while the men are all still recovering, two of Jacob’s sons (Simeon and Levi) bombard the city and kill all the men—including Hamor and Shechem—as well as plunder the city’s riches and capture all the women and children (vv. 25-29). Jacob is outraged when he found out; he claims that intermarriage would have united them with the larger Canaanite people and offered them security in the land, but murdering the Shechemites established Jacob’s tribe as a potential enemy (v. 30). Simeon and Levi protested this assertion by asking the rhetorical question, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” (v. 31).

*Tamar: 2 Samuel 13*⁹

The third and final “other rape story” takes place at a considerably different time period than the other narratives. Set during the reign of King David, the story of Tamar’s rape in 2 Samuel 13 shows a dark side to David’s family life. In this story, which will henceforth be known as the Tamar narrative, David has three children: Absalom, Tamar and their half brother Amnon. Amnon is so obsessively infatuated with his virgin half-sister Tamar that he schemes to sleep with her (13:1-5). He pretends to be ill so Tamar will nurse him; when he is alone with her, he seizes her and

⁹ Refer to chapter 3 for an in depth analysis of the Tamar narrative.

demands that she lie with him (vv. 6-11). She pleads with him to keep from forcing himself upon her, even going as far to request that he speak to David so they can marry and have sexual relations the honorable way (vv. 12-13). Ignoring her, Amnon rapes his half-sister; after the fact, he is disgusted with her and banishes her (vv. 14-18). She puts dirt on her head and tears her clothing—a sign of mourning—and leaves loudly screaming (vv. 18-19).

After the rape, Tamar stays with her brother Absalom for the remainder of her life as a defiled woman; meanwhile, Absalom is outraged that Amnon defiled their sister (v. 20). He does not say anything to Amnon, although he vows for vengeance in secret (v. 22). Two years later, Absalom's men murder Amnon (vv. 23-29).

The four narratives reflect different points in the Bible's history: the pre-Mosaic days of Abraham and Jacob (Sodom and Dinah), the days when judges ruled Israel (Gibeah), and the reign of King David (Tamar). Despite the differences in setting, the four narratives are interconnected by the theme that rape affects more than just its immediate victims. Looking at the larger picture of these four narratives, the Sodom narrative is a different story than it is often misinterpreted to be. The Sodom narrative is one part in a series of rape stories—not a standalone story that begins with attempted male-on-male rape and ends with God wiping out a city. Sodom is part of something that is much bigger than what many have been led to believe.

Removing the Sodom narrative from its rape context strips the story of its anti-rape message and replaces it with an incorrect message that homosexuality is so despicable that God obliterates a whole city because of it. This misinterpretation is by

no means harmless. As one scholar, Gwynn Kessler, puts it, the Sodom narrative has had “negative costs . . . on LGBTQ people over the centuries” by people wrongly associating gays and lesbians with God’s wrath (Kessler 31). By correcting this misinterpretation, this thesis wishes to move the focus away from homosexuality and use the narrative to focus on why rape is a social evil that should be avoided, lest those who commit it end up like the Sodomites (or Benjaminites, or the Shechemites, or Amnon).

CHAPTER 2: RAPE IN THE SODOM AND GIBEAH NARRATIVES

OVERVIEW

This chapter begins our discussion of the four Biblical rape stories by analyzing the Sodom and Gibeah narratives. These next two chapters will set aside all preconceived notions about Sodom and homosexuality in favor of looking at Sodom as a story about sexual abuse—a story that is not much different from the three other rape narratives this thesis will ultimately discuss alongside it. This chapter will specifically focus on the Sodom and Gibeah narratives. First, the Sodom narrative will be discussed, providing a commentary about the way rape is used as a literary device in the story. Second, the Gibeah narrative will be discussed, highlighting not only how the story is like the Sodom narrative but also how it differs from it. Finally, the chapter will culminate with a reflection on why the theme of rape in these narratives is used.

THE SODOM NARRATIVE

As discussed in chapter 1, the Sodom narrative is often incorrectly associated with homosexuality; this type of claim has come from both religious circles and from within academia. However, this story has nothing to do with homosexuality; the

central issue of Sodom is rape. First, there is a threat of male-to-male rape.¹⁰ Second, Lot attempts to barter his daughters' virginity in the place of the threatened men. Third, the story concludes with an epilogue in which Lot's daughters get their father drunk and have sex with him—which, by legal definition, is a form of rape.¹¹ This entire story, therefore, is motivated by either rape or the threat of rape.

Although the main action of the Sodom narrative takes place in Genesis 19, the story begins roughly halfway through Genesis 18. Prior to the start of the Sodom narrative, chapter 18 shows the first Biblical patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah helping a group of three travelers by bringing them some water to wash their feet and feeding them (18:2-5). They hastily put together a meal for the men, and Abraham stayed with them underneath a tree as they ate (v. 8). As they were together under the tree, the men reveal to Abraham that despite the fact that he and Sarah were elderly, God would bless them with a son within the next year (vv. 9-11). The couple had never had any children together, which caused some stress in their household (cf. Genesis 16-17). Sarah, who was old enough to have already been through menopause, overheard the men talking from inside the tent; she laughed at the absurdity of such an idea (v. 11-12).

Then, God—who apparently was nearby, because He appears very suddenly in the narrative—asks why Sarah laughed at the idea, claiming that there was nothing He could not do (v. 13-14). Sarah tried to deny that she laughed out of fear, but God

¹⁰ Consensual sexual activity, including homosexual intercourse, is not the same thing as rape of any type. Rape is a form of violence, not a physical expression of sexual desire; thus this thesis insists on differentiating between sex and rape at all times.

¹¹ According to FindLaw.com: "The victim's lack of consent is the crucial element. A lack of consent can include the victim's inability to say 'no' to intercourse, due to the effects of drugs or alcohol."

confirmed that he heard her (v. 15). At this point, the three travelers left along with Abraham, who apparently walked with them for a bit; the narrative says that they “looked down toward Sodom” (v. 16). The prologue to the Sodom narrative abruptly ends here, with Abraham looking toward Sodom to segue into the main action.

This prologue is not directly connected to the Sodom narrative beyond that segue in verse 16 of Abraham looking toward the city. The Sodom narrative interrupts the main action of the Genesis narrative thus far—which, at this point, has shown Abraham and Sarah’s struggles to conceive a child and an announcement that that struggle was about to end. This interruption shifts the focus from the main narrative into Sodom, which seems to come out of nowhere. It is unclear why this story begins as an interruption. The Hebrew Bible does not give any clues as to why this occurs.

One explanation, however, could be that the larger narrative (Genesis) deliberately set up Sodom as an interruption to the main action of the story to create a sense of urgency in the narrative. By randomly dropping this new side-narrative smack in the middle of Genesis’ main action, the writers force the readers’ attention to move abruptly and without prior warning. This creates a sense of dramatic tension for readers, who now suddenly have their attention forced from one thing to another. Considering the dark nature of the upcoming narrative, this dramatic tension would help set the tone for what is about to occur.

As Abraham looks toward Sodom, God spends a few verses contemplating whether or not he should tell Abraham “what [He] is about to do” (v. 17). God eventually talks Himself into telling Abraham, saying that the sin of Sodom is “so

great” and He needs to see if there has been any improvement in the city before He does whatever He is “about to do”—not yet revealed (vv. 20-21).

This introduction is perplexing and has some unanswered questions. First, it is not clear to whom God is speaking—is he talking to Himself or is He speaking to some sort of divine entity that never gets introduced? If he is talking to some other divine being, this is consistent with other parts of Genesis. For example, one passage in the creation narrative says, “And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (1:26). Some scholars interpret the use of plural pronouns in 1:26 as a conversation between God and a heavenly council (Levenson 12; Whybray 42). Thus, it is not impossible for God to be talking to someone else who is not directly in the scene; but if He *is* speaking to a minion, they apparently are not important enough to introduce. An alternate interpretation is that He is talking to Himself; in this case, this could just be a dramatic presentation of God’s thoughts, similar to an actor in a play delivering a monologue.

Second, what does God mean by “what I am about to do”? This omission seems deliberate enough, however; the narrative may be purposefully holding back in this introduction to elicit curiosity and builds suspense in the reader so they continue on to find out what God is going to do. Once again, this could just be a dramatic presentation of God’s thoughts.

Finally, why is God questioning Himself in the first place? This is particularly interesting because it gives the reader an insight into God’s nature—at least as told in this particular story. The fact that God wrestles with this question reveals two possible things: (1) God is a deity who thinks before He acts, and (2) God did not actually want

to do whatever He planned—which we do not yet know about, but the way God is dragging His heels tells us that it is *not good*. Thus, before the story’s main action appears, the reader sees God’s reluctance to do whatever horrible thing He is about to do; He is a God with a conscience, who does not necessarily *want* to do bad things but who will do so if He has no choice.

The fact that He questions whether or not to tell Abraham also reveals the nature of God’s relationship to him. Having just revealed this amazing information that Abraham and Sarah will finally have a child together, God now hesitates to ruin this joyous occasion with bad news. The fact that God cares so much about dropping this bad news on Abraham reveals that the two have a close relationship with one another; God’s inner dialogue reveals that He is concerned with how Abraham will process this news. Clearly, their relationship is a very personal one; this relationship would go on to set the stage for future relationships between God and Abraham’s descendants.

The story never explains how God told Abraham the news; in the next verse, Abraham suddenly asks God if He will spare Sodom from destruction if he can find fifty innocent people (vv. 22-25). This is how the reader gets an idea of what horrible thing God is about to do: God is about to destroy Sodom because the city is apparently evil enough to deserve it. According to *The Jewish Study Bible*, Abraham is like a prophet at this point: he somehow knows God’s plan for Sodom (Levenson 39). This is the first instance in the Hebrew Bible where this occurs (39). In a sense, this reinforces the personal relationship between God and Abraham; they are close enough that Abraham can hear messages from God.

Abraham barter with God for several verses, arguing God from fifty people (v. 24) down to forty-five (v. 28), then to forty (v. 29), then to thirty (v. 30), then to twenty (v. 31), and then finally down to just ten people (v. 32). The interesting thing about this exchange is that Abraham's focus is not on the evil people in Sodom, but on protecting the people who are innocent (Levenson 39). This logic says that even if the majority of the city is evil, just a handful of innocent people make the whole city worth saving. The fact that God continues to agree reinforces the fact that He does not actually want to destroy the city; if He does, then why is Abraham able to argue Him down from fifty people to just ten without resistance? God seems all too eager to accept Abraham's offers, which shows that He is grasping at straws for a reason *not* to do it.

Once the bargaining ends, both God and Abraham leave the scene (18:33) and the main action of the Sodom narrative begins with chapter 19. We now are in Sodom, where Abraham's nephew Lot lives. The first thing that happens in this part of the story is that we see Lot offer his home to two visiting angels disguised as human men. These visiting angels are likely not the same travellers that Abraham had—or at least the text does not give any clear indication that they are the same people. Lot, apparently taking after his uncle, sees the angels at the gate of the city, insists that they stay in his house for the night, and has a meal made for them (19:1-3).

It is worth noting that the text never says Lot knows these visitors are angels. This may not seem like a major detail, yet it raises a significant issue. If Lot had known the visitors were angels, how could it be certain that his hospitable attitude is out of genuine kindness or if he only offers it because they are angels? In this case, the

fact that he is ignorant to the visitors' true identity allows the text to portray him as a genuinely kind and welcoming man—once again, he is just like his uncle Abraham in this respect. This immediately characterizes Lot as a good man, proving that he is worth sparing from the forthcoming destruction of Sodom.

Things take a disturbing turn after Lot, his family, and the two angels share their evening meal:

They had not yet lain down when the townspeople, the men of Sodom, young and old—all the people to the last man—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may *be intimate with* them.” (Genesis 19:4-6; emphasis added)

The author is definitely going out of his way to emphasize the size of the crowd: he first says “townspeople,” then “men of Sodom,” and then “all the people to the last man.” That is a total of three times that the author emphasizes the crowd size. Clearly the author is trying to paint a portrait of a massive crowd overtaking Lot's home; by comparison, this emphasizes Lot's helplessness compared to the townspeople at Sodom.

The gendered implications of the passage are only partially clear. The passage identifies at least some of the townspeople as men, yet it simultaneously uses non-gendered words to identify the crowd (i.e., “townspeople,” “*all the people*”). Do the gender-neutral words juxtaposed with the male-gendered ones indicate that there may have possibly been women present in the mob? The text does not give any definitive clues, but the fact that the text keeps causally switching between male-gendered words

and non-gendered ones implies that the crowd may not have been entirely male. If that is the case, then what role would the women in the mob play? Were they merely bystanders supporting the men of Sodom? Were they part of the angry mob? This is an interesting question that the text leaves unanswered.

It is possible, however, that the term “people” may not have been as gender-neutral as the English translation indicates. In antiquity, women did not have the same degree of rights as autonomous citizens as men did; they were almost exclusively associated with the patriarch of their families (Frymer-Kensky xv, Bird “Images of Women” 51). Thus, while a reasonable argument could be made that women may have been present in the mob, it is equally possible that “people” could have also been used to only indicate men. Unfortunately, the text does not clearly answer this question.

In 19:5, the Hebrew word translated in English as “be intimate with” is *yada*, which is a broad term for the verb “to know.” The English translation “be intimate with them” has been contested. A common translation for 19:5 has also been “bring them out to us, that we may *know* them” (e.g., JPS Tanakh 1917, various Christian translations such as King James, English Standard, American Standard). This could mean many different things; for example, Toesing points out that sometimes “to know” could mean “to interrogate”—which, in this story, could mean that the men of Sodom were just going to interrogate the angels (Toesing 67). This could certainly be of concern to Lot, as in the Ancient Near East, interrogations were typically inhumane and degrading (68). Also, this could have been particularly insulting to Lot, because demanding that they interrogate Lot’s guests also undermines his authority as head of his household (68).

However, this does not seem to be the case. If Sodom's men only intended to interrogate the angels—however sadistic their methods of interrogation may have been—then why would the author present Sodom as a place so horrifically evil that God contemplated destroying it? If Sodom were really *that* evil, it seems implausible that the author would use the term *yada* to mean that Sodom's men intended to simply get to know the divine visitors and pump them for information. If Sodom's intent were just to do that, then why would God decide to destroy only Sodom and not every *other* Ancient Near Eastern place that *also* practiced cruel interrogation methods? Therefore, it makes little to no logical sense that this could be the meaning of *yada* here.

The alternate meaning of *yada* is to “sexually know” a person—i.e., a euphemism for sexual intercourse (68). By the time the Sodom narrative begins, *yada* has already been used in Genesis to indicate sex: in 4:1 the text describes Adam “knowing” his wife Eve. Thus in that earlier use of *yada* in Genesis, the word is used in reference to the Bible's first incident of heterosexual intercourse. It is logical that if Genesis uses *yada* once to refer to sex, then it would also indicate sex in Sodom's story as well. If this is true, it means the men of Sodom want the angels to be handed over for forced sexual intercourse.

The text does not directly comment on the fact that *yada* in this sense relates to male-to-male rape, which indicates that the idea of it was already abhorrent. In fact, ancient men hearing this story would have understood this as terrifying; as a nomadic culture with little agency, Abraham's family would have been vulnerable to attack from larger cultures—including sexually violent attacks (Niditch 190; Carden 86). The sexual nature of the attack has less to do with sexual desire than it does with

humiliating the victim. In antiquity, the man who “penetrates” during sexual activity was upheld as having honor (Carden 86). To be on the receiving end of sexual activity, however, was considered “dishonorable”; it stripped a man of his manhood and his dignity (86). There is nothing honorable about the acts these men are demanding from Lot’s guests; this is a demand for these men to be degraded and violated, not erotically enjoyed.

This could likewise connect to the narrative’s switch between male-specific and gender-neutral language. Hypothetically, if the crowd included women of Sodom who played an active role in the mob, this means some of the sexual violence could involve female-to-male rape. This is not a radical idea, as there are other places in the Bible that show women using sex as a weapon against men (Judges 16; Proverbs 7:10-23). If this were true, this downplays the male-to-male rape scenario to at least some degree. However, since the text is unclear, none of this can be definitively proven.

Thus, Lot is in a predicament. As the head of his household, he has an obligation to protect everyone in his care; now that the men of Sodom are pounding on his door demanding that the two men he just took in be handed over to be raped, it is up to him to act—and act *fast*. He quickly responds:

So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him, and said, “I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to these men, since they have come under the shelter of my roof.” (Gen. 19:7-8)

Here, the text uses *yada* in the negative (“have not known a man”) to indicate his daughters’ virginity. Once again, this points to the term *yada* being indicative of sexual activity.

Furthermore, 19:7-8 is Lot’s best effort to diffuse the situation. To today’s readers, this part of the Sodom narrative is extraordinarily offensive: no sane person in today’s world would even suggest such a trade-off—much less a parent with their own children! If the intention of the author in this part is to shock the reader, it goes without saying that the author succeeded in doing so.

Yet outrage aside, this shocking aspect of the narrative also serves a far more complex literary purpose. Whereas it is cruel and inhumane that a father would sacrifice his own daughters to save two strangers, the fact is, Lot was in a desperate situation that called for a desperate measure. Frymer-Kensky explains:

From the viewpoint of husbands and fathers, this is a horrifying situation. From the viewpoint of husbands and fathers, it is tragic. Heads of household do not want to have to sacrifice their children and/or their wives. However, they do have the power to do so, and in extreme situations, they will sacrifice their dependents to save their own lives. (Frymer-Kensky 125).

In other words, Lot is not a cruel man who disregards the well being of his children; rather, he is the head of his household faced with a violent mob and expected to protect his guests. With his back against the wall, he has no other choice.

Furthermore, by bartering the virginity of his daughter, Lot is “not giving the men free reign to rape his daughters then and there, as is often interpreted” (Toesing 71). Lot is not implying that his daughters are “valueless”; to the contrary, the fact that

he tried to use their status as virgins to convince the men not to rape his guests reveals that he sees them as “exceedingly valuable” (71). Their value will allow a “hostage exchange” so that the visiting men can escape (71).

At the same time, though, Lot’s intentions would not have stopped the men from raping the girls— it is difficult to say whether the men would have raped the girls or treated them with respect. However, in the story, the mob refuses this negotiation anyway (v. 9). The daughters were lucky enough to not have to be a substitute to an angry mob, although it cannot be denied that he certainly tried. Katherine B. Low summarizes this by pointing out “In essence, Lot violates his daughters. He forces a sexual situation upon them, regardless of their consent or non-consent. Such an act of violation qualifies as sexual abuse” (Low 40).

Since ten righteous people were apparently never found, God indeed destroys Sodom. After fending off the mob, the men tell Lot to gather his family and run—they were sent by God to destroy Sodom because it was such an evil place (vv. 12-13). Although Lot initially hesitates (v. 16), his family safely leaves the city and they flee to another town nearby (vv. 18-22). After they are out, God burns down the city (vv. 22-24). The story ends by coming full circle back to Abraham’s household, where he looks toward where Sodom used to be and sees the smoke rising from the city (vv. 27-29). Thus, the Sodom narrative both begins and ends with Abraham, using him as a liaison between the main narrative and Sodom’s side-narrative.

The story also has an epilogue that is no less disturbing. In this epilogue, Lot and his daughters escape to a nearby cave (v. 30). The daughters are in a predicament since both of the girls are virgins, and in their mind, they have no future prospects for

marriage and children because after having watched Sodom's destruction, they do not know if any other men are alive. For the girls, this is tragic because in ancient society, a woman's sense of value came from how many sons she was able to conceive for her husband (Frymer-Kensky xv, Bird "Images of Women" 51). In Abraham's and Lot's world, the amount of children a man claimed was a direct reflection on his wealth and honor—not to mention a guaranteed way to ensure that his legacy and wealth would continue after his death (Stienstra 76). Now that Lot's daughters had been cut off from their chance at reproducing, they were not fulfilling their social role as women at the time.

Faced with this problem, the women desperately come up with a disturbing plan: the older daughter suggests that they get their father drunk and take turns having sex with him (vv. 31-33). The girls then do exactly that: over two nights, they feed their father enough wine so "he did not know when she lay down or when she rose" (vv. 33-35). Both girls become pregnant from these liaisons with their father, which the text wryly comments are the origins of two tribes—the Moabites and Ammonites—who later become recurring enemies in Biblical literature (vv. 36-38). The incestuous origins of these tribes could be interpreted as an intentional jab at both groups.

On the one hand, the epilogue of Sodom seems to be an intentional jab at these tribes; by stating that they originated from incestuous liaisons between Lot and his daughters, this is both insulting and demeaning. Yet despite the obvious shock value to this epilogue, the text surprisingly makes "no moral judgment" about this act—either "made or implied" (Barton 53). It simply happens and the tone of the text is less

mocking or disgusted; it seems relatively neutral and matter-of-fact on the topic. Their father was “desperate” to barter their virginity to save the guests in his home; the girls were “desperate” because without any prospects left for producing offspring, they were suddenly unable to fulfill their roles as women and bear sons. Their sexual violation of their father seems to hint that the girls’ actions acted a form of justice for their father’s attempt to gamble their virginity.

The ironic thing about the epilogue is that had the story just ended with Abraham watching the city’s smoke rise, the narrative would have never had any actual rape take place. The sexual violence in the main portion of the Sodom narrative is only threatened; it is never actually carried out. Yet with the epilogue, an actual rape occurs. Legally, Lot’s daughters rape their father: he is drunk and unable to consent or defend himself from their actions—the lack of consent is the key element in making this a rape.¹² This is not the only time Genesis addresses women taking sexual advantage of men (c.f., 39:11-12), indicating that female-to-male rape is not out of the question in the text’s world.

Interestingly, few commentators seem to make note of this as a rape scene even though legally, that is exactly what is happening! While it is not clear why so many people miss the point on this, it is possible that it has something to do with the fact that female-to-male rape is often not taken seriously.

¹² Sometimes this story is compared to Genesis 9:20-27, a story in which Noah’s son Ham finds his father drunk and naked. This thesis rejects this parallel. Lot’s daughters both plan and execute the rape of their father, meaning their crime is premeditated sexual assault; Ham sees his exposed father and does nothing about it, meaning his crime is failure to help his father.

THE GIBEAH NARRATIVE

The Gibeah narrative, found in the Book of Judges, is so similar in structure and content to the Sodom narrative that the two are often discussed in tandem. There are, however, some major differences between the two stories that must not be overlooked. For one thing, each narrative is set in completely different times and places. As mentioned in the previous section, when the Sodom narrative begins, the reader had just learned that Abraham's wife Sarah was going to have a baby; their son Isaac (born after the Sodom narrative ends) marks the beginning of the ancient lineage of people that we now call the Jewish people. Thus, when the Sodom narrative took place, the Jewish people did not yet exist; the story pertains to Abraham, the first link in the chain of the Jewish people, and his family.

In the Gibeah narrative, however, many centuries had passed and the Jewish people were an established group of people. They had made a covenant with God, who promised to give them His protection in exchange for their loyalty (i.e., the Law of Moses). They had traveled from Egypt to a small country in Ancient Mesopotamia later named Israel, which God promised would be theirs to claim. They had settled there and divided themselves into twelve tribes, scattering themselves throughout the land and living there. The world, in short, was a very different place than in the Sodom narrative.

The Gibeah story is one of the most disturbing and graphic scenes in the entire Hebrew Bible: a woman is violently gang-raped for an entire night, her body so badly abused that she does not survive the attack. During the time it was written, Israel was still a relatively new nation and it did not yet have a permanent governing body. The

governing body was primarily figures known as “judges,” a group mostly made up of military persons, priests, or prophets (Amit 495). The text highly emphasizes the “inefficacy” of these judges (Amit 495); the Israelites often “forgot” about their “commitment to the covenant” that their people made with God, and would appeal to God as a “last resort” (Fewell 68). Thus, in the Gibeah narrative, we are in a time where tensions in Israel are high. Abuse, betrayal, and civil war are commonplace throughout the land; the “sight of [God]” has ceased to be “the standard of the behavior” (68). At this point, “the people recognize no leadership, either human or divine, and their community has degenerated into chaos” (68).

The story begins with a troubled marriage: a Levite man from Ephraim had a second wife (concubine) from Bethlehem who “deserted him” and went back to her father’s home to live (Judges 19:1-2). The phrase “deserted him” is sometimes interpreted to mean that she was unfaithful to him because the Hebrew wording literally translates to “she played the harlot.” It is not clear why the English translation (“deserted him”) downplays this idea, because images of whoring women being sexually assaulted exist in other parts of the Hebrew Bible (c.f., Hosea 1-2, Ezekiel 16). For today’s standards this is offensive, as the idea that whoring women “deserve” to be raped is often used against real-life rape victims to justify their abuse (Murthy 543). This thesis does not deny the problems with this idea; unfortunately, the Bible is not without its flaws.

After a few months, the Levite traveled to Bethlehem to her father’s house to convince her to return to him (v. 3). He stayed at her father’s house for five days, each day trying to leave but being convinced by the concubine’s father to stay longer (vv. 3-

10). According to the sidebar notes in *The Jewish Study Bible*, the persistence of his father-in-law likely is intended to draw attention to “generous hospitality” extended during their stay in Bethlehem (Amit 537). When the couple finally leaves and travels into the night to Gibeah, the difference between there and Bethlehem in terms of hospitality is a deliberate contrast intended to emphasize that Gibeah is a negative place.

When the couple arrives in Gibeah, an elderly man takes them in; he is also from Ephraim but he lived in Gibeah (vv. 15-21). Similar to the Sodom narrative when Lot takes in the two angels, the unnamed elderly man extends his hand to the Levite and his concubine and welcomes them into his home. Prior to the elderly man taking them in, not one other person in town acknowledges them (v. 15). Thus the Levite and his concubine receive no warm welcoming in the city until the elderly man shows up and extends his hand to them. Niditch comments that this is an “ominous adumbration [overshadowing] of the troubles to come” (Niditch 189). This also further emphasizes the contrast between Bethlehem and Gibeah.

After they settle into the elderly man’s home, the Gibeah narrative begins to really resemble the Sodom narrative:

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the town, a depraved lot, had gathered about the house and were pounding on the door. They said . . . “Bring out the man who has come to your house, so that we can be intimate with him.” The owner of the house went out to them and said to them, “Please, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Since this man has entered my house, do not perpetuate this outrage. Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine.

Let me bring them out to you. Have your pleasure of them, do what you like with them; but don't do that outrageous thing to this man." (Judges 19:22-24)

Thus the narrative here is nearly identical to Sodom: a mob arrives, demands for male-to-male rape are made, and the host makes a counter-offer.

Yet there is a major difference between Sodom and Gibeah: the host's virgin daughter and the concubine—presumably not a virgin—are offered in place of the Levite. The text does not comment on the fact that the host offers someone else's woman, and the Levite raises no objections. The virgin daughter is only mentioned this once; unlike Lot's daughters, she plays no further role in this story. The concubine, however, is not so lucky:

But the men would not listen to him, so the man seized his concubine and pushed her out to them. They raped her, and abused her all night long until the morning; and they let her go when the dawn broke. Toward morning the woman came back; and as it was growing light, she collapsed at the entrance of the man's house where her husband was. (19:25-26).

This is the point where the Gibeah narrative and the Sodom narrative go in opposite directions. In the Sodom narrative, the mob of men never rapes anyone; however, this time, the mob actually *does* rape someone, albeit not the person originally intended.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this story is not just the fact that the concubine is brutally raped, but also that she is raped because her husband pushes her into the violent mob. Figuratively speaking, her husband feeds her to the lions. As mentioned in the commentary over the Sodom narrative, in antiquity an unfortunate reality was that at the time patriarchs had such a strong responsibility to protect their

household that sometimes, his dependents would have to be sacrificed in order to save someone else.

This time, although the elderly man initially attempts to offer up all the women to the mob, the one who ultimately forces the concubine out of the house is the Levite—who is not the head of the household, but just a guest! It is not clear in this story if the Levite is acting to protect himself—since he is the man the mob was asking for—or if this was his way of diffusing the situation since the elderly man was not getting through to the mob. The failure to clearly answer this question is frustrating because the answer could make the difference between the Levite being a heartless, selfish man, or if he was just trying help the only person who bothered to show him any hospitality in that entire town. Perhaps the intention of leaving this open-ended was to allow the reader the chance to draw his own conclusions.

Just when the reader thought this story could not possibly get any worse, the Levite wakes up and discovers his concubine lying unresponsively on the elderly man's doorstep (v. 27). He asks her to get up so they can leave; when she does not respond, he picks up her battered body and returns back to his home (v. 28). After he gets home, he took a knife and cut apart his concubine's corpse into twelve pieces; then he went throughout Israel, scattering the twelve pieces of her body throughout the land as he traveled (v. 29). This portion of the story ends with people in Israel discovering the pieces of her body and reacting with outrage that something so horrible would happen in Israel (v. 30). After the people of Israel learn the men of Gibeah (identified as the Benjaminites) are responsible for the murder of the Levite's concubine (20:1-7), the rest of Israel retaliates against the Benjaminites in Gibeah (vv.

8-12). A civil war breaks out in the land; the Benjaminites lose a significant chunk of their tribe as a result (chs. 20-21). As Bellis explains, “The story of the rape and murder of the unnamed woman becomes the story of the destruction of an entire tribe” (Bellis 132).

Unlike in the Sodom narrative, the malicious intention of the mob in the Gibeah narrative is revealed by the elderly man’s own words: “ravish them and do whatever you want to them” (Frymer-Kensky 125). He is well aware of the burden of this proposal. Interestingly, although he only acknowledges the sexual aspects of the mob’s attack, the mob is not actually interested in the woman (124). Rather, they are only interested in “assert[ing] their own power” over the Levite (126), to “emasculate the traveler, strip him of his pride and his honor, and render him submissive and nonthreatening” (124). Yet when the concubine is handed over, they take her instead. These men understand that whereas raping the Levite is “a more direct way to humiliate the traveller,” they also realize that “gang-raping the girl will also show him who is boss” (126). Either way, the object of the mob violence is intended to be the Levite.

The concubine, therefore, has just two purposes in this narrative: her connection to her husband, and her status as a substitute victim to the mob. She is effectively dehumanized and rendered into little more than a raped body. This is typical with rape in general: according to Gardener and Shute, a rape often involves “treating [the victim] as something other than people . . . treating them as things” (Gardener and Shute 203-204). This is exactly what is happening in this story.

To make matters worse, the concubine dies. The Levite, having lost a considerable amount of his dignity and honor, responds by cutting her into pieces and spreading her corpse about the land. Even to the ancient audience, this is appalling: “this is not proper treatment of the dead” (Frymer-Kensky 128). The Levite has taken her body and used it to proclaim to all of Israel that “his honor has been insulted, his life threatened, and his property damaged” (Fewell 75).

This parallels a ritual amongst Israelite leaders to send pieces of the body of a sacrificial animal around the lands as a means of calling military troupes into action; only instead of a sacrificial ox, the Levite has used the woman (Barton 189-190). This action “shows the monstrous nature of the event,” as since the man has felt “abused,” he “abuses his concubine’s corpse and uses it to inscribe and dramatize his message” (Frymer-Kensky 128). Furthermore, the concubine’s “torn body” acts as a “symbol of the torn shreds of the social fabric: what has been done to her has already been done to the bonds of trust between Israelites” (128).

As disturbing as this story is, it is also a very powerful one—perhaps moreso than the Sodom narrative itself. Tribble claims that the “betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman is a story we want to forget but are commanded to speak” (Tribble 65). She points out that this story depicts “the horrors of male power, brutality, and triumphalism” as well as “female helplessness, abuse, and annihilation” (65). Tribble states that within this book, a troubling display of male protection takes place at the expense of two women:

. . . the lord of the house can do more than forbid. He can offer an alternative
. . . Two female objects he offers to protect a male from a group of wicked

“brothers.” One of these women is . . . his very own daughter. The other belongs to his guest. Moreover, these two females can satisfy the gamut of heterosexual preferences. One is virgin property; the other, seasoned and experienced. Both are expendable to the demands of wicked men. In fact, the lord of the house will himself give these women away . . . The male protector becomes the procurer . . . No restrictions whatsoever does this lord place upon the use of the two women . . . he gives the wicked men license to rape them. (74).

In other words, the male head of this household sacrificed one person’s potential safety and dignity for another’s. She claims that overall, this story implies that a threat to the male’s safety “can be solved by the sacrifice of females” (74).

READING THE STORIES: EMPHASIZING RAPE

The Sodom and Gibeah narratives are often discussed in tandem because in many ways, the two texts read as if they are two different accounts of the same event. Adding that to the fact that the overarching idea connecting the two texts is the concept of rape and the stories are even moreso connected:

If we use the principles of “intertextuality,” that is, if one text has influenced the formation of a second biblical text, we can interpret that second biblical text by reference to the first one. We assume that biblical authors expected their listening audience to do the same thing when they sensed a strong similarity of language between two narratives . . . In both narratives the sin is rape or attempted rape. In particular, it is power rape, that is, sexual violence

for the purpose of degrading someone . . . they want to humiliate the men to make the point that this is their town, they run it, and strangers must recognize their power . . . It is all about power rape and the humiliation of strangers.

(Gnuse 72-73)

The connections between the two texts, in other words, appear to be a deliberate and strategic tool used by the Biblical authors. These stories, it seems, are supposed to build upon one another as examples of the social consequences of rape.

Gnuse goes on to discuss another interesting point: which story came first? In terms of the Bible's narrative timeline, it is obvious that the Sodom narrative is chronologically first. However, this does not necessarily imply that the Sodom narrative was written prior to the Gibeah narrative. Gnuse supposes that the Gibeah narrative is actually the older of the two narratives, citing that the degree of violence and the somewhat less sophisticated linguistics indicates that it may have been written first (72). Considering that there is no clear indication of when Genesis was written (Whybray 39), there is little evidence to suggest that it actually predates Judges in its authorship.

Why does it matter which story was written first, though? If the two stories are so similar—which they are—then what difference does it make which one came first? This initially seems like a chicken-or-the-egg question, but according to Gnuse, there is a good reason to consider this issue. The issue, he claims, brings us back to the problem of people misinterpreting the Sodom narrative as an anti-homosexual text, which is the major point to this thesis. Gnuse explains:

If you read [Gibeah] after [Sodom] you could theoretically argue, as some do, that the issue is about homosexuality because the threat of homosexual rape to the two angels in the first story carries over into the second story wherein the rape of a woman then is considered to be less offensive than the potential homosexual rape of a man. I personally find this argument horrible. If, however, you read [Sodom] after [Gibeah], I believe that it becomes more evident that the issue of rape is the focus of both accounts. In [Gibeah] the threatened rape of a man and the actual rape of a woman then leads you to read [Sodom] as a story of attempted rape of the two angels. (72)

Gnuse raises a good point: the order in which you read the two narratives absolutely matters. As modern readers, our natural instinct is to read the stories in chronological order; thus, it would make sense to first read Sodom, which is set in an earlier time than Gibeah.

Add that to the fact that Sodom narrative is placed first in the larger Hebrew Bible, and it just seems to “make sense” that we read the Sodom narrative first; preconceived notions aside, the dominant threat of male-to-male rape being placed first in the narrative order sets the stage for Sodom being read as a decree against homosexual sex—which is a thread that will continue as the Gibeah narrative is read.

Yet, as Gnuse says, if you simply read the Gibeah narrative first, the dominant idea is not that the townspeople want to rape the men, but that they rape a woman. Once the reader has finished with Gibeah and moves on to Sodom, the real connection between the two texts is more obvious: both texts are about rape in general, not about

the sexual orientation of the attackers. Furthermore, sexual orientation has nothing to do with rape, which is a violent act committed against another person.

Of course, this is all assuming that Gnuse is telling the truth; the downside of accepting his theory is that this puts a lot of weight on the date in which the texts were written. The actual date of Genesis' authorship is not clear enough to truly render his argument reliable. Nonetheless, he has a point: if simply reversing the order in which one reads the two narratives is all it takes to dismantle the argument that the stories are essentially anti-homosexual, at the very least this shows us that the argument that Sodom and Gibeah are anti-homosexual stories is not solid.

Going even further, it *is* a solid fact that no matter which order you present the two narratives, the fact that rape is a factor never changes. In both stories, whether you read Sodom or Gibeah first, the main connection is that they each depict at least three different types of rape/threats of rape: threatened male-to-male rape in both, proposed male-to-female rape in both, actual male-to-female rape in Gibeah, and actual female-to-male rapes in Sodom. In this case, it is obvious that each story's respective author really wanted to drive forward the point of rape and the disastrous social consequences that are connected to it. In the next chapter, these disastrous social consequences will be revisited.

CHAPTER 3: RAPE IN THE DINAH AND TAMAR NARRATIVES

OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we will continue talking about the Bible's four-narrative arc about rape by discussing the rapes of Dinah (Genesis 34) and Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Both of these narratives will be analyzed, paying attention to how the texts (1) discuss the rape of each respective victim, and (2) how it fits into the larger text in which the stories are found. This chapter will then close by contemplating the Bible's usage of rape as a recurring metaphor—and why Sodom's threat of male-to-male rape is no different than any other rape/threatened rape in the Hebrew Bible.

THE DINAH NARRATIVE

Like the Sodom narrative (see chapter 2), Dinah's story is part of the larger Genesis narrative. In the time that passes between the Sodom narrative (ch. 19) and Dinah's narrative (ch. 34), three generations in Abraham's family have passed: Abraham and his wife Sarah conceive a son named Isaac, despite previous fertility woes and old age (ch. 21); Isaac grows up, takes a wife of his own, and sires twin sons named Esau and Jacob (ch. 25); Jacob, the younger twin, marries two sisters, and between the two sisters and their two handmaidens, he sires a total of 13 children—

including Dinah, his only daughter (chs. 28-30). At this point in the story, Jacob has moved his entire family away from Paddan Aram, where his wives were from; after reconciling with his estranged brother Esau, he took his family to Shechem, a Canaanite city (ch. 33). Dinah's story begins right after the family had moved to Shechem.

Unlike the Sodom and Gibeah narratives—where the threats of rape take place in the middle of the stories—Dinah's story begins with her rape:

Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah [Jacob's first wife] had borne to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force. (34:1-2).

No explanation is given: Shechem "saw her" and he "took her." What is interesting about this passage is that the dominant verb is "to see"; Dinah leaves her home to "see" the women of the land, and Shechem "sees" her before he rapes her. Dinah's initially innocent foray outside the home thus turns into sexual assault by a stranger.

Some scholars have questioned if this was a rape or a consensual sexual fling. According to sidebars in *The Jewish Study Bible* the Hebrew is "somewhat ambiguous" as to whether this is a legitimate rape or merely a seduction (Levenson 64). Frymer-Kensky supports this by explaining that the term *innah* is used here—which means "to degrade" (Frymer-Kensky 162). Thus the text does not explicitly say that Dinah is "raped." She goes on to say that there is no mention of whether or not Dinah's participation in this sexual liaison was consensual or forced—even though "from Dinah's point of view, there is a big difference if she is willing or forced"

(Frymer-Kensky 183). She admits that this omission is problematic to modern readers, especially female readers (183).

Yet other Biblical commentaries point to rape, not consensual sex. In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, it is stated the Shechem “forces” her into “illicit intercourse” (Whybray 59). *The Women’s Bible Commentary* explicitly calls this “rape” (Niditch 23). The general tone of the text also contradicts the notion that this was a consensual liaison in any way. If Shechem merely seduces Dinah, then why does the author emphasize that Shechem “took” Dinah and sexed her “by force”? A seduction would mean that Dinah agrees to Shechem’s advances—yet she does no such thing! There is no choice on her part. She is simply *taken*. To say that she is “seduced” is as absurd as saying that someone whose house is burgled is a willing participant in having his home invaded and belongings stolen.

After their liaison, he falls in love with Dinah and asks his father to arrange for them to be married (v. 3-4). Although this is indeed peculiar, it is hardly surprising. In Deuteronomy 22, men who rape unengaged women are ordered to (1) pay a fee to her father and (2) marry her with no option of divorce (vv. 28-29). Contemporary readers would find this objectionable, but in the Biblical world, this is considered ethical.

Frymer-Kensky explains that in antiquity, a woman’s sexual virtue was “the prerogative and the duty of the male members of the family” (Frymer-Kensky 185). A woman’s sexuality did not belong to her; it was “the exclusive property of her husband or whatever male was head of her household” (Weems 4). Thus if a woman in the family is sexually assaulted, it was not understood as a crime against the woman—it was a crime against the men who are in charge of her (Frymer-Kensky 185).

By ancient standards, Shechem's request to marry her was actually the responsible and ethical thing to do. His personal feelings about her are not the important factor in this decision; he is just following protocol of his time. This explains why when the matter is brought to Jacob, he raises no objections to it—in fact, he says absolutely nothing (vv. 5-17).

Other members of Dinah's family do not accept this news so passively. When Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi learned about this incident with their sister, they were angry that Shechem "had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done" (v. 7). In response, the brothers trick Shechem by requesting that if he wishes to marry Dinah, then all the men in his city must be circumcised, just as all the men in Jacob's family were circumcised (v. 13-17). He agrees and all the Shechemite men are circumcised (v. 24). This is particularly interesting because even though Shechem consents, the fact that Simeon and Levi make this demand at all already shows that they are asserting power over the Shechemites. Asking these men to circumcise themselves is a bold request; they are essentially asking the men to alter their genitals! It is possible that their circumcision is meant to add a degrading element to their forthcoming punishment.

A few days later, as all the Shechemites are recovering from their circumcisions, Simeon and Levi attack and destroy the city to avenge their sister's "defilement" (v. 25-28). Furthermore, they "take" Dinah out of Shechem's house after their killing spree and bring her back to Jacob's house. Once again, Dinah is an object to be "taken," albeit this time for noble reasons. The fact that they remove Dinah from Shechem's house implies that this all could have also been a rescue mission. After all,

Dinah never has any control of this situation: Shechem rapes her, arranges to acquire her as a wife, and then she is put in his household like a hostage. Dinah has no agency whatsoever in this situation, so perhaps this is the text's subtle way of commenting on the helplessness of her predicament.

Simeon and Levi's violent attack on the city could also be interpreted as a means of reasserting their family's sense of honor. In those days, a man's strength was often judged based on how well he "protected" the women in his family; thus, by raping Dinah, Shechem called into question the collective manhood of their family unit (Frymer-Kensky 185). They "acted [sic] because they felt helpless and needed justice for their sister," especially when their father Jacob "failed" to vindicate their family's shame (Clark 84-85).

Although their act of vengeance is successful, Jacob is furious at his sons' actions: "Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household'" (v. 30). In Jacob's view, the fact that Shechem threatened their family honor is apparently not a priority. Instead, he is willing to admit that as a new face in town, the family is in no position to cause trouble; thus by launching an attack on them, the brothers have established their family as enemies to the Canaanites, who not only outnumbered them, but who also owned the land. The brothers have no response for this; instead, the story ends with the rhetorical question, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (v. 31). The narrative abruptly ends there—and is never mentioned again.

The brothers' violent retribution against the Shechemite men did not vindicate Dinah; in fact, it made things worse. Prior to Dinah's rape, longtime ill relations between Jacob's family and the Shechemites (descendants of Jacob's brother Esau) had been reconciled (Berlin 68-69) (cf. ch. 33); when Simeon and Levi waged war on the Shechemite men, this ruined these good relations, as many began to threaten Jacob because of his sons' actions (71). Thus the story ends on a bad note: the brothers had set out to get justice for their sister's rape, but they instead ended up causing even *more* problems.

Dinah's story stands out because unlike every other character this thesis discusses who is raped/threatened with rape, as a Biblical character she has absolutely no representation outside her victimhood. Dinah never utters a single word in the whole story (Frymer-Kensky 181). Dinah is such a passive character that had it not been for this story, she probably would have been completely ignored by the Biblical authors. This is very hard for today's reader to accept. Bellis explains:

From a modern Western individualistic perspective the story of Dinah is disturbing because no one seems to be concerned with Dinah's rights, including what we would view as her right to have a voice in decisions that affect her life . . . the story is disturbing to us because we do not know what Dinah's feelings were concerning all the events in the story and what ever became of her. We would like the biblical authors to have answered these questions but they were not interested in them. (90).

Bellis certainly has a point. Dinah's story reveals that the Bible is less concerned with the fact that she is raped and more concerned with her brothers' reaction to it. This

could explain why Dinah herself plays such a little part other than being a victim: because the story is not even about her. The story is really all about Simeon and Levi's revenge; she's just a pawn.

THE TAMAR NARRATIVE

Like the Gibeah narrative (chapter 2), the Tamar narrative takes place in a different part of the Hebrew Bible's historical timeline. The story is in the second installment of Samuel—a two-volume text that covers the rise and fall of Israel's monarchy. As discussed in the analysis of the Gibeah narrative, in Israel's early days the government was disorganized and inconsistent; this was a time of a lot of political and military strife. The central thesis of Judges is that Israel needed a king because they were not successful without one; in Samuel's two installments, the central focus is the establishment of Israel's monarchy and once that is established, the text then focuses on the "personal life of the leaders" to highlight their good and poor qualities (Bar-Ifrat 558). Specifically in 2 Samuel, the central figure is David; while he is a successful monarch, family troubles and "serious mistakes" that he makes in his personal life cause grave consequences (619). One of the troubles in his family is the incestuous rape of his daughter Tamar by her half-brother Amnon, the heir to David's reign.

The relationships between characters is heavily emphasized in the Tamar narrative; *The Women's Bible Commentary* points out that the story of Tamar's rape is "sprinkled liberally with relational words," as if the author is trying to highlight the "intertwining relationships in this polygynous family" (Hackett 93). Tamar and

Amnon are half-siblings, both sired by David but with different mothers (93).

Absalom, who later avenges Tamar's rape, is Tamar's full brother (93). As far as birth order goes, Amnon is the oldest son and Absalom is the third son (the text is unclear where Tamar stands) (93). There is no mention of the second son who should have been in-between the two half-brothers; it is possible that he may have been dead (93). If the absent second son is indeed dead, then Absalom was second in line to David's throne—meaning that the only obstacle between himself and the crown was Amnon. Thus, it is possible that Absalom may have secretly wished Amnon dead so he could have the inheritance to himself (93).

When Tamar's story begins, Amnon makes himself sick because he is so "in love" with his "beautiful sister Tamar" (2 Samuel 13:1-2). As Frymer-Kensky points out, Amnon knows that because of her beauty, potentially any man could want her as a wife (Frymer-Kensky 158). Amnon is lovesick, knowing his feelings for his sister cannot be requited in any honorable way (158). With the help of a friend, Amnon schemes a plan: he summons Tamar to his home to nurse his illness, planning that he will have his way with her once she is there (vv. 3-6). Everything goes as planned: Tamar goes to Amnon's home and prepares food for Amnon, and he tricks her into going to his sickbed (vv. 7-10). Frymer-Kensky comments on the "trap" that Amnon has set for his sister to fall into:

. . . the narrative emphasizes her innocence as she goes about her business in Amnon's house, drawing out the tension of the reader, who knows it all is a trap. And so, like many girls who assume that they are safe in the house of a close relative, Tamar does not suspect anything as Amnon kicks everyone out

and then invites her to his bedroom. The trap is ready to be sprung . . . The change is sudden and unexpected . . . She, who has come on a mission of healing, now suddenly finds herself an object of lust. (159-160)

Frymer-Kensky goes on to say that unlike Dinah, who “goes out” and is victimized, Tamar stays within the “safety” of her own family, amongst a man who is supposed to protect her sexual virtue, no less (160). Tamar fulfills her duty as a woman of her time within her family; she obeys her orders, and she cares for the members of her household. Amnon is exclusively the perpetrator in this scenario; Tamar initiates none of this.

Amnon “does not even try to seduce her”; rather, he seizes her and sharply demands sex (Frymer-Kensky 160). Tamar launches into a speech, begging Amnon to spare her:

“No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you,” (vv. 12-13).

Tamar’s reaction is interesting, to say the least. She “tries to speak from the moral high ground,” reminding her brother that by Biblical law, his demand is an abomination (161). It is also worth noting that Tamar’s comment in v. 12 (“such a thing is not done in Israel”) is almost directly lifted from the words of Dinah’s brothers in Genesis 34:7 (“such a thing ought not to be done”); the fact that this is repeated shows that rape is understood as morally odious in both contexts. Tamar is grasping at straws to remind Amnon of this fact.

In last-ditch effort to cover for Amnon, Tamar even suggests that he do the honorable thing: request to her father “the king” that he marries her—she does not mention anything about this union being incestuous (161-162). Frymer-Kensky suggests that David may have been willing to allow the half-siblings to get married to avoid breeching the Law; the fact that she calls him “the king” rather than “our father” emphasizes David’s influence as a ruler and removes his family ties from them (162).

Even more interesting is that Tamar does not object to his advances on grounds that they are siblings; if this were her primary objection, then why would she suggest that they get married first? Her priority in this situation is not to refrain from sex with her brother: marrying him would have meant that she was (1) obligated to have sex with him, and (2) expected to bear his children. In Tamar’s logic, if Amnon was going to force her into illicit sex, then the least he could do is marry her and make it right. To today’s readers, this is definitely not culturally acceptable; however, the fact that Tamar makes no effort to argue with him on grounds that they are siblings says a lot about how different the world within the pages of the Bible are from today’s world.

Tamar’s begging falls on deaf ears and Amnon rapes her anyway (v. 14). After the assault is over, Amnon regrets his actions and suddenly hates Tamar (v. 15). Arguably, this could be from guilt; it could also just be a case of victim blaming. He orders her to leave; once again, Tamar attempts to reason with him: “No, my brother; for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me” (vv. 16-17). Once again, he does not listen; he sends for a servant and demands that she is removed: “Put that woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her” (v. 17). The wording in this verse is “deeply offending”; the phrase “*that woman*” is a

“contemptuous expression” (Bar-Ifrat 641). Contrasting with his lovesickness prior to the rape, Amnon has “totally dehumanized” Tamar (Frymer-Kensky 164).

As Tamar leaves, she cries and tears her clothing, which are “expressions of grief” (Bar-Ifrat 641). This is not the first time in the Hebrew Bible tearing of garments is associated with sexual abuse. In Genesis 39, Joseph (one of Dinah’s brothers) is living as a servant in Egypt and his master Potiphar’s wife constantly sexually harasses him (vv. 6-11). After Joseph rejects multiple sexual propositions from her, one day she seizes him by his cloak and once again demands sex from him (vv. 11-12); he leaves his cloak in her hand and escapes her clutches (v. 12). The text does not go into detail of this struggle, but the fact that his cloak comes off in her hands implies that he tears out of it in order to get away from her. Thus Joseph tears his garments to escape an unwanted sexual advance; Tamar tears hers to express grief after a completed rape.

The Tamar-Joseph parallel does not just end with the garment tearing. In both cases, the victim in the situation is in a vulnerable situation. Tamar is Amnon’s sister; as an unmarried woman in the family, she is subjected to the control of the men in her family. She has no autonomous agency; she has no power in this situation. Joseph, who originally lives in the same household of Jacob and Dinah, is a foreign servant living under the authority of his master Potiphar—and by proxy Potiphar’s wife. Joseph is socially beneath his masters; he has no power in his situation as well. To make matters worse, Potiphar’s wife lies to her husband that Joseph tried to rape *her* and he is thrown in prison as a result (vv. 13-20). Just like Tamar, who is banished from the house after her rape, Joseph is further subjected to injustice. These parallels

are interesting because they create a sense of intertextual continuity: just like Joseph is sexually abused and wronged, so is Tamar.

After leaving, Tamar goes to Absalom and tells him; even as he seethes with rage and “hates” Amnon, he asks Tamar to remain silent (v. 22). This ends Tamar’s participation in the story: she remains at Absalom’s house a “desolate woman” (v. 20). Frymer-Kensky interprets this:

Absalom does not recognize the enormity of the offense against Tamar, and minimizes what has happened . . . Absalom makes her stifle her rage and leave her grief unassuaged. And why? Because Amnon is her brother. Tamar should sacrifice her rights for the “good of the family.” With Absalom’s words, he betrays her. Like so many victims of domestic sexual abuse, Tamar is trapped by her family. Raped by a close family member, she is denied her right of reaction. She is the victim of both brothers: first by Amnon’s rape, then by Absalom’s silencing. Nobody looks at her as a person. To Amnon, she was an object of lust and then hate; to Absalom, she is a crisis that has to be contained. Tamar’s own feelings do not enter into their calculations. (Frymer-Kensky 167)

Like Dinah, Tamar’s purpose in the story ends almost as quickly as it begins: she is raped and then she is dropped from the text. Her purpose in the text is done, reduced to nothing but a victim with no agency.

David learns about Tamar’s rape, and while he “fumed” with rage, he “did nothing” (Frymer-Kensky 168). The text claims that this is because of his love for Amnon (v. 22). Family politics are at work here: Amnon is the beloved firstborn son,

so David does nothing to punish him. Tamar must be silent about her pain because Amnon is part of the family. The rape is a family secret that no one is allowed to discuss, that no one does anything about—not even David, who as the head of his household and guardian of Tamar’s sexual virtue had the power to do what he wished to Amnon. Yet he did nothing; the rape is a secret kept within the family. Absalom waits two years to get his revenge: he arranges to have Amnon murdered (vv. 23-29).

The parallels between the Dinah and Tamar narratives are obvious. For one thing, in both stories the rapist (Shechem and Amnon) is sexually interested in his victim. Shechem sees Dinah and “takes” her; Amnon “loves” Tamar and tricks her into his clutches. The interesting thing is that neither case is particularly violent; there is no instance where the girls are threatened with bodily harm or terrorized. Both men seem genuinely interested in their victims, and neither man actively terrorizes or brutalizes his victim. Instead, each man forces his victim into sex that she never agreed to have; the absence of violence does not negate the fact that these girls are still violated.

Another parallel between the stories is that in both stories, the victim’s brother avenges her rape by murdering her rapist. While putting a rapist to death has a scriptural basis (cf. Deuteronomy 22:23-24), this issue goes beyond Biblical Law. As mentioned previously, ancient men were socially responsible for the women in their family in many areas, including their sexual experiences. When the girls are raped, their attacks are a sign that their brothers utterly failed to protect their sister from such things. In Tamar’s case, this is even more odious due to the fact that Amnon is related

to both Tamar and Absalom; in a sense, Amnon's rape is a betrayal on the family. Thus, Absalom eliminates the "problem-child" of the family when he kills Amnon.

THE FEMALE VICTIM TROPE

Like the Sodom and Gibeah narratives discussed in the previous chapter, both the Dinah and Tamar narratives use sexual violence as the catalyst of their plotlines. Even though these stories all take place at different points in the Hebrew Bible's overall timeline, what ties each of these stories together is how rape is used to prove a point. This commonality is why this thesis has chosen to discuss these stories as if they create a four-narrative arc about the disastrous results of sexual violence.

There is a major difference between Sodom/Gibeah and Dinah/Tamar we have not yet acknowledged. In Sodom/Gibeah, the threat of rape occurs first (i.e., Sodom's men to the angels, Gibeah's men to the Levite) and the actual rape of one victim by many perpetrators occurs later in the story (i.e., Lot's daughters to Lot, Gibeah's men to Levite's concubine). Between the two stories, the victims are both male and female.

In Dinah/Tamar, however, this is not the case. In both stories, the only rape victims are female characters. There is no direct threat of male rape or literal occurrence of male rape in either story. This is not to say that men are not violated in other ways. Dinah's brothers murder the Shechemites while they are all recovering from genital-related surgeries, leaving room for Freud in Dinah's story. Absalom murders his half-brother in Tamar's story; while not necessarily sexual in nature, murder is no less odious than rape. However, the fact that male rape victims are

virtually absent in these stories is interesting. Why the sudden shift in victim-focus? Why are male victims no longer being acknowledged?

Rape is often considered a form of gender-related violence, meaning that the primary victims are assumed to be women. This assumption is not baseless; statistics have often shown that victims of rape are most commonly women. According to the National Violence Resource Center, 1 in 5 women versus 1 in 71 of men get raped in their lifetimes (“Statistics about Sexual Violence”). The problem with these numbers, however, is that this depends entirely on the rapes that are reported. The same statistics that report high numbers for female victims/lower numbers for male victims also admit that “rape is the most under-reported crime” and that only slightly over half of all sexual assaults are reported to authorities (“Statistics about Sexual Violence”). This means that the aforementioned statistics could be higher or lower for either gender; it is not impossible that most of these “silent victims” could be men.¹³

The idea that rape victims are mostly women, however, is not a new assumption. The Bible itself has evidence that rape may have always been associated with women. In Deuteronomy 22:25-30, laws regarding what to do in the event of the rape of a virgin woman are discussed. In this entire passage, male rape is not mentioned even once; the rape victim in this context is always a woman and the perpetrator is always a man. The rest of Biblical Law is equally silent on the issue of male rape. Whereas this does not negate the fact that male rape exists in the Bible, the absence of it in the Law implies that either (1) the rape of women was a bigger threat,

¹³ This thesis is not interested in delving into reasons why men could shy away from reporting sexual assaults; it is beyond the scope of this project to do so.

or (2) male rape was not taken as seriously as the rape of women for some reason. In either case, this would explain why women are the only victims in the Dinah and Tamar stories: the “female victim” trope was a familiar enough trope to the original audience of these narratives to be effective.

Despite these gender issues, the Dinah and Tamar stories play the same role as Sodom and Gibeah. All four stories collectively reveal that rape has serious social consequences that extend beyond the immediate victim. In each case, regardless of the gender and circumstances of the victim, bad things happen when someone is forced into sexual activity. This bottom-line context is crucial to keep in mind going into the final chapter of this thesis, which will discuss how the implication that Sodom is an anti-homosexual story ruins the anti-rape message that the narrative has when read in alongside the other rape stories.

CHAPTER 4: SODOM IN AMERICAN JURISPRUDENCE

OVERVIEW

This chapter differs from the previous two, which analyzed the four rape narratives (i.e., Sodom, Gibeah, Dinah, and Tamar) in light of how they connect to one another. As these earlier chapters demonstrated, the Sodom narrative is not about homosexuality; instead, it is part of a larger Biblical narrative about rape. Now that the narrative has been analyzed and recontextualized, this chapter will focus on sodomy laws in the United States; these laws were not originally used to target same-sex couplings, yet in the United States they evolved into being associated with gays and lesbians. This chapter will first trace the history of American sodomy laws, from origins outside the United States to application therein, focusing on key events that influenced their application and eventual overturning. After this, this chapter will end back in the Sodom narrative, pointing to how the narrative—like the laws associated with it—was not originally intended to pertain to anti-homosexual sentiments.

Chapters 2 and 3 used a combination of Biblical scholarship and literary analysis to discuss the four rape narratives within their historical and textual settings. This chapter moves away from this methodology and focuses on the social, political,

and historical development of how “sodomy” became misassociated with homosexuality. The central question is now as follows: if the Sodom narrative is not about homosexuality, then how did the incorrect idea that it *is* become so popular? This chapter proposes an explanation of how this misconception developed, spread, and persisted over time—and why we should stop believing it.

NOTE ON WORLDVIEW

Before continuing with this chapter, it is important to note that this thesis has a regional bias for the United States. Oftentimes, scholarship can limit its focus to the social and political environment in which the author or academic institution is located; this thesis is no exception. There are two reasons for this thesis’ regional bias. First, this thesis has been completed in an American higher educational institute; for that reason, the most accessible research for this project has been American academic sources. While a small amount of these sources has been from non-American sources, the majority of the research has come from American conversations on the subject. The second reason is that the author of this thesis is an American by nationality; therefore, the author’s worldview is limited by educational, social, political, and cultural experiences from the United States. Both of these factors collectively kept the context of this conversation within the American academic conversation on the topic.

This current conversation may have an American focus, but that does not mean that it has to always remain as such. Other academics that may not have an American worldview are certainly welcome to contribute to this conversation with his

or her own educational, social, political, and cultural experiences; after all, the purpose to education is to keep the conversation moving.

PERSISTING MISCONCEPTIONS

Associating the Sodom narrative with antagonism toward homosexuality contributes to a myriad of problems for the lives of American LGBT individuals. Toesing says that contemporary religious antagonists to LGBT individuals picket LGBT-friendly functions with signs reading “Homosexuality = Death (Gen. 19)” or “God Hates Fags (Gen. 19:24-25)”; these Biblical references, specifically citing the Sodom narrative, twist the story to shame gays and lesbians (Toesing 61). Toesing’s examples reveal how such accusations remove the Sodom narrative from its full context, reducing the complex story to just two variables (i.e., male-to-male sex and death). As discussed in chapter 2, this is simply not the case.

Others may not brandish a “God Hates Fags” sign but still prooftext¹⁴ the Sodom narrative to call homosexuality sinful, unnatural, destructive, or unhealthy (Carden 83-84). Outside religious circles, some scholars continue to promote the idea that Sodom is anti-gay (Alter 33 and 36; Gagnon 58; cf. Toesing 61-62). American law used to employ “sodomy laws” (referencing the fallen Biblical city), which bans oral and/or anal sexual activity. These laws did not exclusively apply to homosexual activity, yet in time they evolved in the United States to connecting to gays and

¹⁴ “Prooftext” refers to the practice of referencing Biblical verses out of context in order to support certain perspective. This distorts the verse from its actual meaning and supports a false meaning.

lesbians, creating what has been called the “bedrock of discrimination” against LGBT individuals (Andersen 3).

This chapter explores American sodomy laws by retracing their historical evolution in the following order: their earliest origins within ancient belief and protocol, their establishment in early modern Europe and adoption in the American colonies, their persistence until judiciary challenges forced them to cease, and their legacy for gays and lesbians after they were invalidated by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS).

AMERICAN SODOMY LAWS

Although most relevant history of American sodomy laws takes place in the twentieth century, their origins go back to centuries before Europeans colonized the Americas. Prior to the spread of Christianity, the Hebrew Bible contained laws that forbade certain sexual activities for ancient Israelites. Among other things, male-to-male sex was listed as one of these forbidden sexual activities (Leviticus 18:22; cf. 20:13). In the text, this is one of many different activities listed as an abomination; the text equally forbids other things such as sex with one’s mother (18:7), menstruating women (18:19), a neighbor’s wife (18: 20), and an animal (18:23). Woman-on-woman sex is never listed, as the author seems to assume the audience of this text is male. These small handful of verses are the seeds at which the idea that at least male homosexual sexual activity have been planted.

As time passed and Christianity grew in both size and influence throughout the ancient world, early theologians endorsed a relatively new spiritual ideology that

men's souls were in constant conflict against their bodies, which is what Rosemary Radford Reuther calls "soul-body dualism" (Reuther 156). According to this belief, she says, "flesh must be subject to spirit in the right ordering of nature" (157).¹⁵

All of this led theologians to call for tightly controlled sexual behavior. Sodomy was one of many sexual "sins," alongside masturbation, pregnancy prevention or termination, and extramarital sexual relationships (Eskridge 161). While same-sex couplings fell into the category of "sodomy," they applied to opposite-sex couplings as well (161). The key problems with sodomy from the perspective of Christians in late antiquity was that these acts "undermin[ed] marriage and den[ied] the procreative imperative" (161). Thus the problem with sodomy, in the minds of these early theologians, was not the participants' gender, but the *type* of sex they were having. Anal and oral intercourse was unproductive and could be easily committed outside of the context of marriage; therefore, it was considered immoral.

This broad definition of sodomy reveals something interesting. If sodomy could be committed by anyone (i.e., not just between two people of the same sex), then logically, there is no reason to assume that the Sodom narrative (i.e., the laws' namesake) exclusively referred to homosexuality. As discussed in chapter 2, it is clear that the particular brand of sodomy in the Sodom narrative was male-to-male forced sodomy—this cannot be denied. However, if the early theologians had reason to believe that Sodom's central sin was homosexuality, then why name the sexual sin "sodomy" if it was supposed to apply to opposite-sex couplings as well? This indicates

¹⁵ Reuther's argues from a feminist standpoint, claiming this soul/body dualism was also understood in terms of gender (men associated with the "soul" and women associated with the "body") (Reuther 156-157). Although she does not state this, it could be argued that associating women with the body could present the passive partner in male-to-male sex as "feminine" and therefore antagonistic to the "masculine" soul.

that at the time, the early theologians did not associate Sodom with male-to-male sex, but with the type of sex involved.

Tightening controls over human sexuality culminated into the first official sodomy law in 1534 CE, when English king Henry VIII established a decree against buggery (i.e., anal penetration) (Gorton 10).¹⁶ Henry VIII's new legislation made buggery a felony, meaning that violators could face execution or loss of property rights (10). This was a major turning point in the criminalization of sexual activity; prior to this law, sodomy was a spiritual problem rather than a legal one (10). Creating an official legal code and establishing tangible legal punishment for sodomy brought this issue into the secular public, turning "a sin" into "a crime" (10).

Approximately one century later, European colonists as well as Puritan settlers brought England's sodomy laws with them to the Americas (Andersen 62; Gorton 11-12). Ellen Ann Andersen explains that in Plymouth, the Pilgrims established eight offenses that were punishable by death—four of which pertained to sex ("sodomy, buggery, rape, and adultery") (Andersen 62). Whereas eleven of the thirteen colonies kept prohibitions against these four acts, not all of these laws carried a death sentence (62). Some were punishable by life imprisonment, whipping, public humiliation, or loss of property rights (62). Interestingly, these early American laws were not specific about what behavior constituted "sodomy." It is not clear whether these laws exclusively applied to anal and oral sexual activity, or if they included other

¹⁶ It was around this time that the term "sodomy" itself made an appearance in the English lexicon. The term "sodomy" evolved from the Late Latin term *peccatum sodomiticum*, which means "sin of Sodom" ("Sodomy").

nonprocreative sexual acts such as “mutual masturbation” (i.e., digital stimulation of a partner’s genitals) or “tribadism” (i.e., two women rubbing their vulvas together) (62).

These early decrees against sodomy were not specifically associated with same-sex couplings. Richard Godbeer explains:

Theological and legal formulations in early New England, which together constituted the region's official discourse, had no place for desire or sexual orientation as distinct realms of motivation. Puritan thinkers condemned sexual “uncleanness” in general and sodomy in particular as sacrilegious, disorderly acts that resulted from innate depravity, the expression of which did not have to be specifically sexual. The word “lust” denoted any “fleshly” impulse that distracted men and women from “spiritual” endeavors; illicit sex, drunkenness, and personal ambition were equally lustful in Puritan eyes. Official statements on sodomy were sometimes inconsistent in their details, but two fundamentals united them: neither ministers nor magistrates thought of sodomitical acts as being driven by sexual orientation, and they were unequivocally hostile toward those who committed sodomy. (Godbeer 261-262).

Thus at the time, sodomy was a general act that could be committed by any person.

The misdeed was not about the sex of the offender, but rather about the specific sexual *acts* that were being committed. This indicates that a Puritan husband and wife would have been equally guilty of sodomy for engaging in oral sex in their marital bed as two men secretly engaging in the same activity outside of their respective marriages.

After the United States officially became an independent nation in 1776, the sodomy laws remained intact throughout the first two centuries of the new nation’s

existence. The application of these laws was a common question brought to the legal system. Courts did not always agree on how to define “sodomy.” In *Prindle v. State* (1893), for example, the Texas Court of Appeals overturned a sodomy violation for fellatio, arguing that whereas the act was “vile and detestable” it was not criminal (Andersen 62). Other courts argued that fellatio was actually worse than anal sex and counted as sodomy (62).

By 1940, the general consensus amongst most states was that “sodomy” included oral and anal sex, regardless of the gender of the participants (62). At this time, the penalties for engaging in sodomy ranged from three years to life in prison; sometimes offenders were labeled as “psychopaths” and they were detained until they were “cured” from their desires to commit sodomy (62). This indicates that in some cases, not only was sodomy considered a criminal act, but possibly a sign of mental instability.

During these two centuries, something else also changed: the idea of sexual orientation slowly came into fruition. As briefly discussed in chapter 1, sexual orientation is a relatively modern conception that mostly developed into what we understand today during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Katz 55-56). In the Victorian era, the term “sodomite” began to be used to describe a person who committed sodomy; using this term was a stepping stone toward placing identifying labels on one’s sexual leanings (Power et al. 215). As the medical profession gained power and influence, the term “homosexual” was invented, which allowed for sodomites who engaged in same-sex sodomy to be separated into a separate category

than sodomites who engaged in opposite-sex sodomy (215). Thus, the social categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” were born.

By the twentieth century, debate over the right to privacy transformed the nation’s social and political landscape. This debate was by no means new—the right to privacy actually went all the way back to the Puritans in the seventeenth century (Irons and Guitton 341). However, in the twentieth century, new questions pertaining to personal privacy pushed the issue into the forefront (341). For example, in 1928, Boston lawyer Louis Brandeis argued in a case against federal wiretapping that the United States Constitution granted Americans the “right to be let alone,” a right he argues is “most valued by civilized man” (339-340). Although Brandeis’ case had nothing to do with sex, his argument paved the way for the later privacy issues about sex to be brought forward (340).

By the mid-twentieth century, the issue of privacy gained influence in the legal system. The American Law Institute (ALI) created a Model Penal Code, which called for “private consensual activities” including sodomy to be protected from legal prosecution (Andersen 62). This led to Illinois becoming the first state to remove sodomy laws from the books in 1961 (63). During that same year, Justice Harlan argued in a legal battle about a Connecticut law barring doctors from proscribing contraceptives that the US Constitution guaranteed the protection of “privacy of the home” and that the state had no right to intrude upon that privacy (Irons and Guitton 340). After this argument, legal arguments against various sexual jurisprudences began to grow in strength; these challenges revealed a split amongst the American public, in which one side argued for “traditional values and legal restraints on ‘immoral’ acts

like pornography and sodomy” and the other side argued for the “values of ‘autonomy’ and personal choice” (341).

While Illinois stood alone in their decision to decriminalize sodomy for the next ten years (Andersen 63), the right to sexual privacy as a whole continued to blossom. In 1965, SCOTUS made a landmark decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut* that abolished the aforementioned laws barring married couples from obtaining and using contraceptives (20). Justice Douglass wrote the majority opinion, saying “an intimate relationship of husband and wife” ought not to be intruded upon (20-21). More landmark decisions in sexual jurisprudence followed: *Stanley v. Georgia* (1969), in which “possession of obscene materials in the home” was declared “constitutionally protected”; *Eisenstaedt v. Baird* (1972), in which contraceptive usage for non-married individuals was legalized; and *Roe v. Wade* (1973), in which laws abolishing elective abortion were overturned (21).

Both the general rising popularity of the right to privacy and the emerging Gay Rights Movement influenced the removal of sodomy laws (62-63). The Gay Rights Movement officially began in 1969 with what is now known as the Stonewall Riots: on June 28th of that year, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York called Stonewall Inn was invaded by the police (23). Prior to this night, police regularly stormed gay bars, arresting and harassing patrons; on this night, fed-up patrons resisted the police and “fought back,” which led to a three-night riot (24). Thousands of others joined in throughout those three days, fighting the police, shouting protest chants, defacing public property with “gay power” slogans, and loudly declaring that they were no longer willing to be legally harassed for being gay (24). After these riots, gay activists

began to push for social change for the lives of LGBT individuals, including various legal rights and protections that had previously been denied to gays and lesbians.

In the Stonewall aftermath, more states adopted the ALI's Model Penal Code. Between 1971 and 1983, thirty-four states adopted it and this affected the status of sodomy laws in each state that adopted it (63). In 1971, ten years after Illinois' decriminalization of sodomy and six years after the Griswold decision, Connecticut became the second state to abolish sodomy laws (63). After Connecticut joined Illinois in liberalizing sodomy laws, a domino effect took place amongst the states: five more states abolished their sodomy laws by 1974, then the total number went up to twenty-one by 1979 plus four more by 1983 (63).

Yet not every state was as socially progressive. Twelve states did not adopt the Model Penal Code: five of those states made no changes to their existing sodomy laws, and seven of those states rewrote their sodomy laws to only pertain to same-sex couplings (63). The fact that more than half of these states rewrote their sodomy laws to specifically target same-sex acts suggests that for at least some states, sodomy between heterosexual and homosexual couplings was not held in equal regard. It is no coincidence that these same-sex specific sodomy laws were written during the same time the Gay Rights Movement was gaining traction.

Despite all the progress with sodomy reforms in previous decades, the decade-long trend of states dropping their sodomy laws stopped in the mid-1980s (61). The election of President Reagan shifted the dominant political and judicial opinion to a more conservative viewpoint; Reagan never directly shamed sodomy reforms, but he was strongly opposed to the right to privacy arguments that supported related sexual

privacy principles, namely for abortion (75). In his presidency, he appointed more conservative judges in both the lower courts and in the SCOTUS, which helped halt some of the progressive judicial reforms from the previous decades, including sodomy reforms (75-78).

The AIDS crisis of the 1980s further created social backlash against LGBT individuals—particularly against gay men (78). Attorney Danny Hill launched a campaign for stricter sodomy law reforms during this time, citing AIDS as the motivation:

The incidence of AIDS in person who engage in homosexual conduct and its deathly public health threat are newly discovered evidence. Although AIDS had been discovered at the time of [*Baker v. Wade*, 1982]¹⁷, its direct relationship to homosexual conduct was not fully established. AIDS is recognized by the medical community as one of the most deadly and proliferic [sic] diseases in recent memory and is directly related to homosexual conduct. The court should consider the public health dangers which AIDS poses and its relationship to the type of conduct which is before the Court in this action.

(qtd. in Andersen 78-79)

Hill also called for a Texas bill for stronger sodomy statutes to “prevent homosexuals from destroying the nation’s health” (79). The bill failed, but the fact that he even made this argument reveals the negative impact AIDS had on sodomy reform (79-80).

Then on June 30, 1986, the debate about sodomy reform took an interesting turn. SCOTUS made a controversial 5-4 decision declared a Georgia sodomy law

¹⁷ *Baker v. Wade* was a US District Court case that claimed a Texas sodomy law violated rights to privacy and equal protection.

constitutional (Irons and Guitton 361). This case, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, pertained to the 1982 arrest of Michael Hardwick in Atlanta, Georgia. Hardwick was employed at a gay bar in the area, and initially was ticketed by the police for drinking alcohol outside the bar (362). Although Hardwick paid the ticket, a “mix-up” with the local police caused a warrant to be placed for his arrest; when the police arrived at his home, the police caught him engaging in fellatio with another man (362). Both men were arrested on sodomy charges; although the charges were dropped, Hardwick joined forces with two married heterosexuals to sue the Georgia State Attorney General (362). Although a federal appellate court ruled that “private, consensual behavior among adults” was protected by the Constitution—citing *Griswold* and *Roe* as precedent—the case eventually went to SCOTUS (362-363).

In the 5-4 decision, *Bowers* ruled that the Georgia sodomy statutes were constitutional. Justice Byron, who said that “the law is constantly based on notions of morality”, wrote the majority opinion (368). He said the Georgia’s law was based on beliefs that “homosexual sodomy is immoral and unacceptable” (368). The majority went on to say that the Constitution did not extend any right for gays and lesbians to have consensual sex because it only protected rights that were “deeply rooted” in history and tradition” (369). Justice Burger concurred by stating that sodomy laws were “firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards” and that SCOTUS ought not to “cast aside millennia of moral teaching” (369).

Chauncey points out that SCOTUS often relies on “tradition and history” when interpreting cases, especially in terms of “how constitutional principles have been interpreted, what laws have been passed and how actively they have been applied, and

the social attitudes they represent” (Chauncey 29). SCOTUS, therefore, was not wrong for pointing out that homosexuality was historically considered immoral on a religious and social level.

Yet it is not that simple. Chauncey goes on to point out a flaw in the majority’s logic:

The majority’s ruling in *Bowers* relied in large part on a sweeping narrative of “tradition and history” that found no support for a right to sodomy . . . This sweeping narrative of unchanging and ceaseless hostility toward homosexual conduct was linked to an equally sweeping set of assumptions about the unchanging character of human sexuality, although one that was utterly shaped by recent historical developments in sexual identity and identity politics. The majority in *Bowers* treated Georgia’s sodomy law as if it applied only to homosexual conduct, when in fact it also prohibited oral or anal sex between men and women and between married as well as unmarried couples. *This astonishing misreading of the statute under review was linked to the majority’s interpretation of the entire history of sodomy laws as distinctly antihomosexual measures.* (30, emphasis added).

The *Bowers* decision was flawed because it took a legal statute with a broad application to all people (homosexuals and heterosexuals) and applied it to only one specific group of people (homosexuals).

This argument is congruent with *Bowers*’ dissenters: Justice Blackmun chided the majority for what he referred to as an “obsessive focus on homosexuality” and he pointed out that even though sodomy laws were supposed to apply to everyone in

theory, in practice the laws often singled out homosexuals (Irons and Guitton 369). Arguably, the majority's focus on homosexuality could be due to the fact that Hardwick was arrested for male-to-male sodomy; yet as mentioned previously, Hardwick's original case also involved a heterosexual couple as well. This fact is noticeably absent in *Bowers*' ruling.

Furthermore, *Bowers* led to some unintentionally negative consequences for homosexuals: in the 1996 US Court of Appeals case *Nabozny v. Podlesney* about a young man who was violently bullied on a regular basis at school for being gay, the defense cited *Bowers* and claimed that if states could legally criminalize homosexual sodomy, then there was nothing legally wrong with discriminating against homosexuals (Pinello 49-52). The defense eventually lost the case (52), but the fact that *Bowers* was cited as precedence for legally allowing gay students to be assaulted at school reveals that the *Bowers* decision was by no means a harmless ruling. It gave those opposed to homosexuality—including those violently opposed to homosexuality—legal leeway to harm gays and lesbians.

This is not to say that there was no opposition to the ruling. After *Bowers*, none of the states that had dropped sodomy laws attempted to place them back in the books, and efforts to combat the existing laws actually increased (Andersen 98; Bernstein 10-11, 15). Sodomy laws as a whole steadily declined in the next seventeen years, until *Bowers* was overturned by another SCOTUS case, *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) (Andersen 61). *Lawrence* concerns a Texas man named John Geddes Lawrence, who was arrested for having consensual sex in his apartment with another man named Tyron Garner (Bernstein 12). At the time, Texas had a sodomy statute that only

outlawed sexual activity between people of the same sex (14). SCOTUS picked up the case and on June 26, 2003, declared that the statute violated the right to privacy and due process (Bernstein; cf. Andersen 98).

The *Lawrence* decision was crucial because SCOTUS directly denounced *Bowers* in the ruling: “*Bowers* was not correct when it was decided and it is not correct today. It . . . should be and is now overruled” (99). It must be noted SCOTUS rarely overtly condemns a decision that is less than twenty years old (99). This indicates that *Lawrence* was not a decision the SCOTUS took lightly.

Furthermore, Court recognized in the *Lawrence* ruling that criminalizing private behavior incited stigmatization and discrimination from the public (Bernstein 14). SCOTUS wrote:

Were we to hold the statute invalid under the Equal Protection Clause, some might question whether a prohibition would be valid if drawn differently, say, to prohibit the conduct both between same-sex and different-sex participants When homosexual conduct is made criminal by the law of the States, that declaration in and of itself is an invitation to subject homosexual persons to discrimination in both the public and in the private spheres. The central holding of *Bowers* has been brought in question by this case, and it should be addressed. Its continuance as precedent demeans the lives of homosexual persons. (qtd. in Bernstein 14).

SCOTUS therefore acknowledged that beyond the problem of policing private sexual behavior, the sodomy laws were problematic because they had adverse consequences for same-sex couples. This statement from the case invalidates prior statements that

the law applied to all American persons equally, pointing out that the “equal application” did not apply because that was not how the law was used in practice.

After *Lawrence*, it did not take long for backlash to arise. In February 2004, then-President Bush announced his support for a constitutional amendment that would stop same-sex couples from getting married and negate any same-sex marriage licenses that had already been legally granted (“Bush Calls for Ban”). This instigated a decade-long political and legal battle about same-sex marriage that culminated in another SCOTUS decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), that reversed state laws that limited marriage to opposite-sex partners (Murray 574). SCOTUS used the *Lawrence* case to provide proof that there were legitimate “shifting societal views regarding homosexuality, same-sex intimacy, and same-sex marriage” that needed to be accommodated (575). Justice Kennedy also stated that the 2003 decision “extend[ed] beyond mere freedom from laws making same-sex intimacy a criminal offense” (574-575).

After *Obergefell*, the two major means of legally regulating sexual behavior—marriage and criminal sex laws (578)—were officially altered to accommodate the interests and needs of gays and lesbians. This is important because as Melissa Murray, Professor of Law at the University of California, Berkley School of Law, points out, these two spheres “divided the universe of sexual activity into legitimate, valued sex (that is, sex eligible for marriage) and illegitimate, deviant sex (sex subject to criminal prohibitions)” (578). Outlawing same-sex marriage and same-sex sodomy worked in tandem to invalidate homosexuality as a reasonable sexual identity (578). Thus, although *Lawrence* and *Obergefell* are two separate decisions on seemingly separate

issues, the two decisions support the same values and ideals. It is important, then, to understand that the eradication of sodomy laws impacted the LGBT community beyond legally granting same-sex couples the right to have private, consensual sex without fear of being criminally charged.

Despite all of these important advances for the LGBT community, backlash continues to attempt to shut down the progress. Some of this backlash has been from religious grounds, one major example taking place in July 2015 when a county clerk in Kentucky named Kim Davis was cited with contempt of the court for refusing to grant same-sex marriage licenses because she believed that it contradicted her conservative Christian beliefs (Ortiz et al. paras. 1-3). Davis' actions gained widespread media attention and debate about whether religious conviction was a valid excuse to refuse to perform job-related tasks. Davis is hardly the only American to speak out against homosexuality citing religious beliefs, but her actions reveal that religious backlash against the LGBT community is based on deeply ingrained ideologies that will not be negated by policy changes.

The term "sodomy laws" are associated directly with the Biblical term Sodom, which makes a clear connection of the laws to the Bible story. Our historical analysis has revealed that these laws applied to both opposite- and same-sex couplings in theory, but that in practice they were only applied to the same-sex variety. It also has revealed an inconsistency in the assumption that "sodomy" is synonymous with "gay sex": if both the early theological beliefs and the early sodomy laws extended to opposite-sex couplings as well, then it makes no sense that the Sodom narrative was

understood as homosexuality-specific. This inconsistency indicates that when the term “sodomy” was used, it had a larger application. Thus, the Sodom narrative could not have been solely associated with same-sex couplings because if that were true, the laws would have been exclusive to same-sex couplings from the beginning! With all that being said, the final section of this chapter will take us back to the Sodom narrative, reflecting on why it is crucial to rethink the way the narrative is read.

THE FOUR RAPE NARRATIVES: WHAT’S THE CONNECTION?

The four stories discussed earlier in this thesis exhibit so many different types sexual violence: attempted male-to-male rape, completed female-to-male rape, threatened male-to-male rape, completed male-to-female gang-rape, and two instances of completed male-to-female rape. Furthermore, each of story takes place in completely different times of the Bible: two different generations of Biblical patriarchs, pre-monarchial Israel, and monarchial Israel. In all these different contexts across the board on the Bible, the issue of rape occurs again and again.

Why would the Bible use this theme, though? Why is rape such a critical issue that it has to keep occurring so often and in so many different contexts? What is it about rape that is so odious that the Biblical authors chose to use it again and again to prove theological points? Even more confusing, why does the type of rape keep changing, to the point where more than one of these stories contains more than just one type of sexual violation?

One possible explanation is that the Biblical era was a particularly savage time. Perhaps the threat of rape in Biblical times was just *that* commonplace that it ended up

creeping into the text. This is possible according to Niditch, who points out that as a minority culture, the Israelites were often vulnerable to attack from larger ones—and sometimes these attacks could involve sexual abuse (Niditch 190). Rape has historically been used as a tactic to exert dominance over another (Carden 90); it is not a stretch to say that the Biblical authors may have been very concerned that they could be raped at any time.

However, this is not just a matter of history. Whether or not rape was a worse phenomenon in the Biblical era is debatable. Case in point: in recent years, people have referred to American society as a “rape culture” because rape is often normalized and justified as an inevitable part of society (Suarez and Gadalla 2028). Rape has not become any less severe of a threat since the Biblical authors wrote about Tamar’s own brother forcing intercourse onto her or the men of Sodom angrily demanding that angels of God be handed over for forced buggery. Rape has certainly not improved over time, which means that our world is no less violent than the world within the pages of the Bible.

It is more likely that the issue of rape is so prevalent in the Bible because of the nature of the crime. Sexual violence is a particularly odious because unlike other crimes, the victim is very intimately violated. Parts of their body that are, under normal circumstances, kept private, are invaded and used harshly. This is incredibly degrading to the victim, who is reduced to nothing more than their invaded, battered flesh that is stripped of its dignity. In a sense, sexual violence is so awful because it is both incredibly personal and incredibly dehumanizing.

With this in mind, this makes the fact that the Sodom narrative is often mistaken as a decree against homosexual relationships an even bigger insult. Ideally, all relationships—homosexual as well as heterosexual—are based on mutual, consensual, intimate love between individuals. Sexual violence is none of these things: there is nothing loving, mutual, or consensual about rape. In the Sodom narrative, the threat of male-to-male rape is certainly none of these things, either; just as the other instances of sexual violence are not. None of the victims in these Biblical stories agreed to their victimhood. To draw parallels between consensual homosexual relationships and sexual violence, then, is absurd.

WHY A NEW READING MATTERS

Throughout this thesis, the central argument has been that the Sodom narrative has been consistently misinterpreted to name Sodom's sin as homosexuality. These last three chapters have (1) offered a better interpretation of the Sodom narrative; (2) discussed the narrative in the context of other Biblical narratives of the same theme; (3) discussed sodomy laws and how they were not originally intended to connect to homosexuality; and (4) show that the connection to homosexuality in both sodomy laws and the Sodom narrative itself was a later development. After all this discussion, we now need to actively take steps to stop misinterpreting Sodom before incorrectly associating the narrative with homophobic ideologies continues to hurt others. Obviously, this task is easier said than done. Simply arguing that the Sodom narrative has nothing to do with homosexuality is not enough to solve the problem. It is a good

start, but it is only that: a start. The next step is to offer an alternative to replace the incorrect interpretation.

As chapter 1 discussed, some academics have made efforts to do these things. While many of their discussions have merit, the majority of these discussions fail to look at Sodom from the broader perspective of where it fits within the Hebrew Bible. When it comes to Biblical scholarship, many scholars fall into the trap of focusing on the specific narrative a little too intently—that is, they analyze the story on its own and ignore its connections to other Biblical narratives. While this certainly has some value in academic discourse, Biblical tunnel vision is risky because it ignores the fact that Bible stories are not supposed to be read in a vacuum. The fact that the Bible exists as one large collection implies that the original creators wanted it to be read as a collective group of stories, not as separate entities. If there were no reason for putting all the stories together, then logically, the anthology we now call the Bible would not exist in the first place.

Reading the Sodom narrative in light of the larger Biblical narrative, therefore, forces us to look beyond the tendency to obsessively focus on the details and instead see how it works with the big picture. It shows us that Sodom's specific type of rape (i.e., male-to-male attempted rape) is not the point because the same threat of rape occurs in the Gibeah narrative, but the end results are different because the crowd in Gibeah is just as satisfied with the rape of a woman as they were with the rape of a man. It shows us that, just like Dinah's brothers invaded and destroyed a city after she was raped, Sodom's threat of rape also brought on a disaster to a city. It shows us that the aftereffects of rape continue beyond the actual incident (e.g., Lot's daughters

raping their own father, civil war in Israel, Jacob's reputation amongst Canaanites ruined, David's family collapsed). Finally, and perhaps above all, it shows us that sexual violence is a very real threat that needs to be challenged by any means necessary. None of these things have any part of validating homophobic religious discourse, which is a narrow and simplistic view of the story.

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