



# Reading Sodom through Sexual Violence Against Women

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## Abstract

This article considers how modern attitudes toward sexual violence against women influence the popular reception of Genesis 19. First, rape myths equate rape with sexual desire, supporting the assumption that Sodom is a story about gay sexual attraction and queer identity. Second, rape discourses minimize the threat of violence against Lot's daughters, ignoring how they may be crucial to the attribution of gay desire in this text. Finally, the normalization of rape influences the traction that this story receives in the Christian imagination in contrast to other stories about the rape of women, like Judges 19–20, which are quickly excused or marginalized. Genesis 19 becomes an authoritative text because it is about what men do with men, while the presence of raped women in other stories has curiously little authority in Christian life. I conclude by imagining how we might read Lot's daughters back into the text, reconstituting a Christian imagination that combats the normalization of rape.

## Keywords

Genesis 18–19; Homophobia; Judges 19–21; Levite's Concubine; Lot's Daughters; Misogyny; Rape; Sexual Assault; Sodom; Violence against Women

## The Imagination of Sodom

When I served a congregation that was struggling over the issue of same-sex marriage equality, I found references to Genesis 19 in the strangest places: on my desk, in my office mailbox, even mailed to my home along with printed online commentaries on Scriptures condemning “the gay lifestyle.” I heard references to Sodom from deeply sincere Christians who knew and loved their Bible. I heard the term “Sodomites” from parishioners who I suspect had never so much as cracked open the book of Genesis. At the time, I wondered how the Sodomites' threat of sexual violence against two strangers could have anything to do with making vows to marry someone of the same gender.

Then, in September 2016, a rapist named Brock Turner was released on probation for good behavior, a mere three months after receiving a six-month sentence for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman behind a dumpster on the Stanford University campus.<sup>1</sup> The victim was

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1 Ashley Fantz, “Outrage over 6-month sentence for Brock Turner in Stanford rape case,” CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/06/us/sexual-assault-brock-turner-stanford/>.

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unconscious as a result of intoxication, clearly unable to defend herself from this attack. But the judge felt that a prison sentence would inflict a severe impact on the young man, all for one horrible, unfortunate event. It was then that I remembered a phrase that I had heard long ago in the queer community: homophobia is built on misogyny. More particularly for this Scripture, the rhetoric against gay desire is built on the normalization of rape.

This article explores this connection between Genesis 19 and rape, suggesting that discourses surrounding the rape of women are functioning silently behind the interpretation of gay desire in the Sodom text. By using Genesis 19 to explore violence against women, I do not wish to discount how this text has been recruited for homophobic ends and has justified violence against queer bodies as a form of holy punishment. Homophobia, our extreme reaction against what men do sexually with other men, remains a central issue in how some churches interpret Sodom's destruction.

Instead, I hope that reading at the intersection between homophobia and misogyny will highlight the gendered assumptions that reinforce violence against both female and queer identified bodies. As concern for women is minimized and a horror against gay men maximized, both risk objectification and greater violence of all kinds. Those who believe God rained down fire and brimstone at the threat of gay sex seem to assume that God would have been less angry and less destructive if the Sodomites had raped Lot's daughters instead. I am claiming that in order to interpret this text in reference to queer bodies at all, we must first go through the interpretive door of rape. And the key to that door is the rape of women.

## The Hermeneutics of Rape

Throughout the scriptural history of towns and kingdoms conquered, property is plundered and women are taken (Deut 21:10–14; Num 31:14–18; 1 Sam 30:1–6). In the ancient prophecies we find the metaphor of rape evoked as a symbol of domination, humiliation, and destruction. Israel is an unfaithful bride and will fall like an assaulted woman (Jeremiah 13; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2). Scattered amongst this general violence against women are a handful of more detailed rape stories. In Genesis 16, Hagar is "given" to Abraham by Sarah, making both complicit in what is tantamount to Hagar's sexual assault. In Genesis 34, Dinah is raped by Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite. In Judges 19, the Levite's concubine is gang raped by the Benjamites in Gibeah. In 2 Samuel 13, Tamar is raped by her brother Amnon. In 2 Samuel 11, David takes Bathsheba from her rooftop. In Genesis 19, a band of men crowd at Lot's door with the intent to rape his male visitors, even refusing to rape Lot's virgin daughters in their stead.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is rarely associated with these other stories of rape. Perhaps this is because rape is considered a woman's issue, as typically as gay desire in Sodom is a man's issue. Rape stories in the Bible have never garnered much weight in Christian ethical teaching. Preachers do not preach on them. Christian cultures do not uphold rape as a particularly contemptible sin. Christian churches do not picket at the courthouse on rape as the cornerstone of moral abjection or societal decay as they do with same-sex relations. Congregations do not offer programs to change those whose lifestyle sexually objectifies women in the way they try to deprogram gays and lesbians. In the minds of most Christians, the drama in Genesis 19 is not about rape. Rather, they equate same-sex identities with an alleged Sodomite desire. Thus, concern for rape against women (or men) is minimized, while at the same time a different kind of retributive holy violence is enabled against those perceived to be associated with gay desire.

It is not surprising that assumptions regarding violence against women trouble this text, because we never read Scripture innocent of our social conditioning. We make sense of a text by engaging the interpretive frameworks that we have absorbed from our culture and faith tradition. The discourse surrounding rape is one of these consistent interpretive frameworks, and it is drawn from our socialization to broader gender norms. From a thousand small interactions that condition our behavior and language, we learn to designate "male and female" as a binary split between active

and passive, public and private, strong and weak, agent and object, desiring and desired, penetrator and penetrated. We connect this binary to attitudes around sexual expression, such as the attribution of vitality and power to male sexual conquests, distinctly contrasted to the moral weakness or “whore” identities attributed to women who engage in similar behaviors. Significantly, sexual identity is also tangled into these regulatory norms, as we attribute feminine traits to gay men or masculinity to lesbian women.

How we speak of rape draws its language from this complex delineation of the sexes. It reinscribes gender norms of power and weakness, sexual agent and sexual object. In this split, rape is a regrettable but normative expression of that binary. Men rape women because the man is dominant and the woman passive, the man strong and the woman weak. Rape is also considered a form of sexual expression. Men desire sex, and women are desirable. Men initiate sexual encounters, and women respond. Rape is an issue of too much desire or too strong a sexual pursuit that leads to violence. For instance, one rape myth related to sexual desire is the myth that men cannot stop themselves once they have become sexually aroused. This belief connects rape to desire, and is common enough to be a subscale on the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale.<sup>2</sup>

Once sexual violence is reported or enters into trial, society then debates the crime through these broader gender discourses around male and female. Women as objects of desire are vulnerable to rape, and their actions expose them to this danger.<sup>3</sup> Society often believes that women make possible their own rape by inciting desire through loose moral character, seductive behavior, or dangerous habits of entering public male space unprotected or intoxicated. We look for the mistakes a woman might have made to increase her vulnerability to the inevitable danger of rape. When a woman claims to have been sexually assaulted or raped, society examines her past relationship with the assailant and her past sexual activity with any man. She is judged for her general moral character in areas such as alcohol use or criminal activity. Because rape is equated with a form of sex, she is examined for seductive dress, behavior, or conversation before the assault that might have encouraged the attack.

These common conventions delineate rapes that are considered punishable from those unfortunate acts of nonconsensual sex that I call the *normative horrible*. Normatively horrible acts of sexual violence are acts deemed regrettable and yet ultimately excusable. They are often excusable because of the actions of women before or during a rape related to desire. If we believe that women cause the rape by inciting desire or fall prey to the irresistible desire of men, it is a horrible experience, but in some sense inevitable. The Stanford rape case, where Brock Turner received a six-month sentence for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman, is an example of how even the most obvious cases of victimization can be interpreted through the lens of the normative horrible. Turner was allegedly aggressively flirtatious toward other women in the past, was aggressive in his sexual overtures to the victim’s sister that night, and then walked his intoxicated victim out of the party to sexually assault her.<sup>4</sup> There is evidence that he took pictures of the victim’s breasts and sent them to others. He was caught on top of the unconscious woman behind a dumpster, chased down by two male students, and restrained until the police arrived.

This assault on an unconscious woman seems an obvious act of punishable rape. But there was a debate about whether the young man should have a more lenient sentence because he was intoxicated at the time. He also expressed “sincere remorse and empathy for his victim,” according to the

2 D. L. Payne, K. A. Lonsway, and L. F. Fitzgerald, “Rape Myth Acceptance: Exploration of Its Structure and Its Measurement Using the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 33 (1999): 27–68.

3 Nicole Bedera and Krisjane Nordmeyer, “Never Go Out Alone: An Analysis of College Rape Prevention Tips,” *Sexuality & Culture* 19 (2015): 533–42.

4 Ray Sanchez, “Stanford rape case: Inside the court documents,” CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/10/us/stanford-rape-case-court-documents/>.

sentencing recommendation from probation officer Monica Lassetre.<sup>5</sup> Turner further blamed his adjustment to Stanford, his youth, and his drinking for causing him to make such poor decisions. While the crime itself was too clear to be contested, his actions were a drunken mistake, or an error that can be solved with an apology, or an anomaly in light of his current empathetic stance toward his victim. It is horrible, and yet somehow normal enough to be excusable. Our culture's perception of the inevitability of rape is part of what allows us to minimize the importance of such sexual violence. Rape is an ever-present risk at the edge of intoxication, dangerous public spaces, or the invitation of a woman's flirtation. It may be a crime, but in the end it is considered an intrinsic part of the fabric of society or an extreme expression of the desire innate to the pursuit of sex.

Distinguishing a truly punishable rape from the normative horrible often requires special markers of strangeness. In these myths, rape is a form of violence enacted by strangers, especially by predatory men of color, or by poor or mentally ill men who overcome women with their attack. In contrast, during the Stanford case, there was suspicion that the judge gave a more lenient sentence to Brock because of his white race, his status at an elite university, or his involvement in competitive sports.

Even in cases of punishable rape, our culture still believes that women remain responsible for the acts of sexual violence perpetrated against them. A raped woman should have limited her exposure to dangerous streets and strangers, controlled her actions or dress, and refused to flirt or accept attention from men that might point to her vulnerability to be raped. When I asked my class of fifty students how they limit their movements because of the threat of rape or sexual harassment, the responses filled a long row of four blackboards: they avoid traveling in the evening and walking in dimly lit areas. They consider how they dress or hold their bodies in public, or avoid contact with men on the street. Given that these women's wariness was focused on avoiding attacks by strangers, it was difficult to accept the reality that statistically women are more likely to be sexually assaulted by someone they know and trust rather than a complete stranger. We make assumptions based on modern discourse, practice, and interpretive structures that influence how we respond to sexual violence in the news—and in Scripture.

## Rape Discourses and Scripture

In today's society, there are many people who are outraged about men having nonviolent, consensual sex with men, but violent sexual assault against women fails to produce the same level of concern. After decades of feminist advocacy against rape culture, in which rape seems commonplace, one wonders: Who would not condemn rape in the Scriptures as morally reprehensible behavior? Certainly readers would claim that the rapes of Dinah and Tamar were inexcusable crimes. With some convincing, one might add Bathsheba and Hagar to the list. But the tendency to conflate rape with desire rather than with violence makes even these crimes seem more like the normative horrible than an inexcusable sin, anathema to the Lord. Because of our attitudes toward the rape of women as normative, the rape of women rarely catches public attention as something out of the ordinary or worthy of comment in either pulpit or public square. As an extreme category of sex, rape is regrettable but expected, and time is spent to excuse or rationalize the crime.

The rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 is a well-studied example. Susanne Scholz considers Dinah's rape for how interpreters participate in cultural discourses that apologize, evade, and minimize the harm of rape.<sup>6</sup> She notes five tendencies that she has read in the commentaries on Dinah's story.

5 Thomas Fuller, "Court Papers Give Insight into Stanford Sex Assault," *New York Times*. [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/brock-turner-stanford-rape.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/brock-turner-stanford-rape.html?_r=0).

6 Susanne Scholz, *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

(1) Scholars marginalize the rape in their exposition. (2) They condemn the brothers who sought revenge and identify with Shechem, the rapist. (3) They conflate rape with love. (4) They emphasize Dinah's mature age to belittle or discount the effects of the rape. (5) Finally, they introduce the concept of "Orientalism" to divert attention from the issue of rape and onto "foreigners" and men "of color," thus describing rape as a custom of the "Orient." There are many reasonable scenarios that excuse or minimize the rape of women, and thus we do not possess a Dinah discourse on rape in the same way that we have a Sodom discourse on gay identities.

According to Caroline Blyth's study of Genesis 34, the most common rape discourses that inform our understanding of biblical stories of rape remain the same across the centuries, thus minimizing the atrocity of sexual assault against women and also reinforcing conventional gender norms about women and men.<sup>7</sup> These include the belief that there is no such thing as rape, that rape is little more than normative consensual sex, that women are to blame for their rape, and that women make false allegations of rape. It also includes suggestions that women become "damaged goods" after they have been raped. Conventional norms further tell us that the rapist is a stranger, or that he is mentally unstable or socially marginal. Normal men do not commit rape without good reason, and that good reason is related to the normative conduct of women.

We can see the equation of rape with sexual desire working behind readings of Genesis 19. The story is usually interpreted through two main themes: men desiring sex with men or a breach of ancient hospitality. For the former, God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah because the Sodomite men desired to have sex with other men. Rape as an act of violence or humiliation (against men or women) is not the issue that compels God's wrath. Instead, it is assumed that the men of Sodom are gay because they threaten to force themselves upon the male visitors. Because many interpreters believe that rape is a form of sex, rather than a form of violence, and that rape is an expression of sexual desire, the one you threaten to rape is by necessity the one whom you desire sexually. The one whom you desire also establishes your sexual orientation or identity. Such interpreters, then, assume that the men of Sodom wish to rape men and do so because of gay desire. God's greatest wrath is now reserved for gay people rather than rapists. God's wrath is unleashed against men who have consensual sex with men, rather than those who use sexual violence to harm and humiliate men or women.

I will briefly review two examples, one Roman Catholic and one evangelical, to illustrate how these assumptions fray the plotline in this text. Innocent Himbaza, Adrien Shenker, and Jean-Baptiste Edart, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, interpret the men's demand to "know" the strangers as an expression of sexual desire. The commentary ponders, "It is difficult to imagine that all of the inhabitants of Sodom were homosexuals in the current sense of the term."<sup>8</sup> The authors decide that not all the men of the city were present, but presumably a group representing the gay population of Sodom. This interpretation ignores the flow of the whole story, which requires that all the men in Sodom be proven wicked. From an evangelical perspective, Kent Hughes deals with the number of gay men by making the claim that "homosexual practice had become a dominant way of life in Sodom."<sup>9</sup> He derives this claim from texts in Leviticus (18:22, 24; 20:13, 23) that suggest sex with other males is one of the "perversions of the Canaanites." Hughes refers to the intended rape as a sign that the men had taken the sin of homosexuality already dominant in Sodom to a new low, "the added depths" of sexual violence. He claims that "Lot's home was encircled by

7 Caroline Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's Silence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

8 Innocent Himbaza, Adrien Shenker, and Jean-Baptiste Edart, *The Bible on the Question of Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 20.

9 Kent Hughes, *Genesis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 270.

a vast, gibbering mob of lustful men of every age, howling for perverted satisfaction.”<sup>10</sup> This colorful interpretation assumes that rapists rape because they cannot control their lust. In this interpretation, rape is a form of sex, compelled by sexual desire innate to sexual orientation. Rape is the act that satisfies this surfeit of desire.

## Lot’s Daughters and the Minimization of Rape

Queer theologian Mark Jordan counters such assumptions with the claim that if Sodom was known as a den of gay iniquity, it would make little sense to try pacifying a band of violent homosexuals by offering to send out women instead.<sup>11</sup> This wry comment leads us to the second theme of hospitality, and the question of how Lot’s daughters are interpreted in this text. Many contemporary biblical scholars have interpreted this story through the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) norms of hospitality that run counter to the theme of gay desire.<sup>12</sup> According to ANE customs, once a householder addresses a stranger, he must host him. As a host, he must protect him even at the risk of ruin for himself and his house.<sup>13</sup> According to this socio-historical interpretation, the main sin of Sodom is the breach of a male householder’s expected hospitality to male strangers.<sup>14</sup> The threat of sexual violence and the offering of Lot’s daughters increase the drama of Lot’s attempt to protect his guests. Commentators also contrast Lot’s hospitality to Abraham’s superior treatment of the guests in Genesis 18.

While claims that the story is about ANE hospitality seek to counter the classic interpretation of homosexual desire, these claims sometimes have the secondary result of minimizing the theme of homosexual violence. As in the case of Dinah, readers can excuse the offering of the daughters as an ancient custom of foreign men. Lot’s daughters become a sacrifice to the greater good of (male) hospitality. The treatment of these women is ancillary to the power relationship between the men in the story. When commentaries arrive at the offering of Lot’s daughters, they assure that it is indeed horrible, and maybe even shocking to contemporary readers, that these women are offered. After claiming disapproval of Lot’s offer, many interpreters—Miguel De La Torre being an exemplary exception<sup>15</sup>—move quickly back to the main plot of men dealing with other men. In the ancient world, women are property. Offering Lot’s daughters to be gang-raped is horrible, but it is explained away as an issue of honor or a requirement of ancient hospitality.<sup>16</sup>

It is possible that offering one’s daughters to be raped and tortured was an act of sacrificial hospitality in a patriarchal world. But this interpretation is drawn from the assumption that if the daughters belong to their father, their abuse rather than their protection is par for the patriarchal course. When commentaries suggest this, they do more than enlighten their readers on the limits of an ancient, male-dominated social order. They justify Lot’s offer as the “normative horrible” in this context. Every time the reader interprets the offering of Lot’s daughters as a horrible

10 Ibid.

11 Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).

12 E.g., Choon-Leong Seow, “Textual Orientation,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 17–34; Miguel De La Torre, *Genesis, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

13 Mario Liverani, *Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, trans. Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mierop (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

14 E.g., Abraham Kuruville, *Genesis: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Searcy, AR: Resource, 2014); James McKeown, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

15 De La Torre, *Genesis*, 202–205.

16 E.g., W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, WestBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Seow, “Textual Orientation”; and Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*.



Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Rape of Proserpine. Mauro Magliani for Alinari, 1997. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy. Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

but understandable act, the reader reproduces an ethical system where the rape of women is decried in words while remaining somehow justifiable in action.

Thus reading the story of Lot's daughters through claims to ancient hospitality becomes entangled with the usual practices of rape discourse that encourage interpreters to minimize, justify, or excuse the actions of the men in the story. Instead, they emphasize the foreignness or the exceptional nature of the situation. If a woman had not been in that house, or involved in that culture, or in that particular situation of danger, she might have avoided rape. It is an issue for *other* tribes and peoples, the fault of *their* culture or custom. When we come from the assumption that there is a reason why rape happens, the reason reinforces the idea that rape is somewhat inevitable and ultimately excusable as a crime. It also means that we do not have to talk about it, for as the normative horrible we disown the act and yet expect it to occur. This way, the text can quickly return to the central concern of what men do to other men.

From a feminist perspective, it could be argued that the concept of women being used as commodities, to be raped, abused by fathers, or treated as property, is neither a distant cultural

odddity nor anything new in the experience of women. We are hardly facing a completely foreign understanding of violence against women. This kind of violence is instead so natural and commonplace to the reader that it is quickly passed over as a sub-plot or a prop to what they perceive as the main drama of the story, a concern about male sexual acts. According to Esther Fuchs, stories in Scripture that display women as ancillary, insignificant, or morally flawed always have been taken in stride. Individual acts are exonerated, and the responsibility for them is “placed on an ancient society that exists no more.”<sup>17</sup> The question from Fuchs's perspective is not the existence of patriarchal power in the ancient world, but how that representation is still justified, universalized, and naturalized through interpretations of the biblical text.

## The Exchange of Women

The contrasting reception histories of Genesis 19 and its sister story in Judges 19–21 can illustrate how rape as normatively horrible desire informs our reading. Genesis 19 and Judges 19–21 have a similar structure, suggesting that they might have been derived from an earlier story. The narrative may be part of a larger genre, in which a deity disguised as a man repays hospitality by saving his host from the desolation of a city.<sup>18</sup> In both stories, a stranger arrives as night falls upon the city and risks spending the evening exposed in the city square. A resident alien takes the stranger in and

17 Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000), 11.

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

offers a feast, an act that emphasizes that no native of the city has offered hospitality. By night, a mob of local men surround the house with the intention of raping the stranger. The head of the house comes to the doorway and tries to bargain with the men of the city by offering them the women in the house. Both stories end in moral chaos, destruction, and death.

When this ancient plot is knit into the biblical accounts, it holds its basic structure, even as the details diverge. In Judges, the Levite pushes his concubine outside to the men of Gibeah, who rape and abuse her all night long until she is left to die on his doorstep. The men inside the house, and also the more valued virgin daughter, are protected at the expense of the concubine's life. There is certainly ambivalence about the figure of the Levite as a selfish and violent man. The actions of the mob are also questionable, because it is an era when "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 20:25). The story of Judges 19 results in tribal war against the Benjamites, the tribe in which the violence took place.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to this story, the men of Sodom reject Lot's offer of his two virgin daughters. Angels intervene to protect both the men and the women in the house from further violence. The story ends when YHWH rains down fire to destroy the wicked and Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt, while Lot and the daughters manage to escape.

These two accounts so similar in their structure have different import in contemporary Christian discourse. The story of the concubine and her horrific rape (Judges 19) has virtually no symbolic place in popular Christian imagination. It is possible to spend many years of Sundays in church without hearing the story of Judges 19–21. While "Sodomite" has become a catch-phrase in modern culture for men who engage in sexual relations with men, there is no word in Western culture that references the gang rape of a woman in Judges 19. There is no term "Gibeahite" that plays its part in the lexicon of straight sexual relations to evoke disgust or fear, condemnation or prohibition. There is no flurry of Judges quotations from popular preachers in a prophetic response to court cases that have freed rapists. The Genesis 19 text is used in Christian debates on legal issues such as anti-discrimination cases or same-sex marriage debates. Contemporary Christians do not have to read Genesis 19 to know that the story of Sodom is attached to a larger polemic that directs God's wrath against those who claim an LGBTQI+ identity.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the mere threat to rape men in Genesis 19 establishes a horror and a legacy that has no parallel in the completed gang rape and death of a woman in Judges 19–21, or in any of the other instances of the actual rape and assault of women in Scripture.

The Sodom and Gibeah stories begin with the threat to rape men. But Gibeah disappears from popular imagination because the men in Judges give up their demands for the man and instead rape a woman. The subject of the sexual violence is the main difference between these two stories, and the rape of a woman removes the Gibeahites from the charge of gay desire. The rape of a woman makes the story less significant and more easily excusable, because women are normally the recipients of rape. But when the men of Sodom do not give up their demand to rape the men and reject Lot's daughters as objects of rape, our assumptions about rape take hold of this text. For what sexually normative man would not rape women instead of men? For instance, J. A. Loader offers a clear example of how the assumed "rapability" of women works in the background of the text. The Sodomites refuse to change their intentions in spite of the "accommodating way" in which Lot approaches them with the

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19 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). The reader cannot know for sure whether war avenges the concubine's death or the dishonor to the Levite whose property is destroyed through her death. The story is not necessarily in favor of the woman, since hundreds of women are then given away or abducted to repopulate the tribe of Benjamin. But it does reveal sexual violence as a symbol of social chaos, because "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 20:25).

20 Most readers are by now familiar with "LGBTQ," a designation for Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer. The "I" stands for "Intersex," a term used by people whose biology and/or physiology does not fall neatly into the male-female sex binary. The plus sign indicates other identities.



offer of his daughters.<sup>21</sup> Loader claims that perverting the customs of hospitality is symbolically expressed in the perversion of natural sexuality. Perversion, rather than violence, is the sexual motif because virgin women were offered and turned down in preference for raping men.

## Reading Lot's Daughters

How can we think more imaginatively about Lot's daughters? That Lot was willing to offer them to be raped certainly designates them as patriarchal possessions and as potential objects for Lot's personal and political needs. But the reader does not have to assume that such an extreme sacrifice would have been normative or applauded by ancient audiences.

Women were certainly objects of exchange that bound men and their households together. But hospitality customs were not just about defending a guest at all costs, even to the sacrifice of its women. According to Mario Liverani, there were conventions about the correct exchange of goods required to create or strengthen male relations.<sup>22</sup> The donor must offer the object (such as women or shelter) willingly. The receiver does not demand or threaten. It is further assumed that the receiver would be able one day to reciprocate to strengthen the bonding relationship. The arrangement must not appear purely utilitarian or economic, but based on fostering social relationship. So a transfer of objects that appeases a potential threat is an aberration to hospitality. It is forced, utilitarian, and outside of the dynamics of reciprocity. As Liverani claims in relation to Judges 19, offering a woman to the crowd is "a message from an issuer who is not willing to issue, to an addressee who is not willing to receive."<sup>23</sup> It is hospitality's anti-message. If this is the case, then Lot is responding as a weak man when he offers his daughters to appease a threat. He is giving in to an aggressor to try to restore social relations with the men of Sodom. He is further ignoring the fact that the women are already promised through betrothal to other men in the city. He defends the male visitors by breaking his vows to other men, confusing the balance of his social responsibilities.

Perhaps a patriarchal culture would *condemn* Lot for not being able to defend his own household or to protect its guests without such a forced exchange. Lot's inability to manage the crowd might reveal him to be a lesser man than the Ephraimite householder in Judges, who is repeatedly called an "old man" (19:16, 17, 20, 22) to emphasize his lack of power against the men of Gibeah who surround his house. Lot, behaving like an old man, fails in his inappropriate bargain and cannot control the mob. Because he is ineffectual, he is pulled back inside by the angels. This is not the first time Lot has failed to protect his family. The women might remember how the king of Sodom had once taken them all captive, and they were saved by Abram's army, who fought for their freedom. As head of his house, Lot appears to be a weak patriarch incapable of protecting the women or men under his care.

Lot's incompetence continues as the story unfolds. He is ignored by his future sons-in-law, who appear to disrespect their own ties and obligations to Lot's household. He then puts the women at further risk by delaying their escape. Again, it is the angels who must take action to pull Lot and the women to safety. Perhaps Lot's wife looked back longingly, realizing that her fate in Lot's hands would only get worse. His daughters remain at the mercy of this man's poor planning and questionable leadership. He is afraid of the hills and then afraid of Zoar. He ends in a cave with his daughters, as refugees at the edge of civilization. This is hardly the image of a noble householder

21 J. A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish and Early Christian Traditions*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 37.

22 Liverani, *Myth and Politics*.

23 *Ibid.*, 174.

who sacrifices for the greater social good of hospitality to the stranger. Instead, the angels appear to be the only presence concerned with the safety of the household in the story.

Thus, I read this story not as an indictment of same-sex behavior but as condemnation of an incompetent patriarch who proved unable to protect his family. In the end, Lot's daughters take matters into their own hands. They take the most decisive action of any character in the story by determining their own future. They get their father drunk and effectively rape him instead. They are presented as the active party in taking control of their sexual encounter with Lot. The oldest lies with Lot, using a verb that describes what Shechem does to Dinah, and what Reuben does to Bilhah, suggesting that Lot is not a willing party.<sup>24</sup> Having witnessed their own potential rape, the destruction of the city, and the death of their mother, the daughters may not have much respect left for their father. In the final wordplay, the men may have wanted to "know" the strangers, and the women heretofore had not "known" a man, but in the end Lot does not know he is becoming the progenitor of his own lineage.<sup>25</sup>

This strange moral and social unraveling suggests another interpretive possibility. If we read rape across its accounts in Scripture, we might notice that rape lodges itself indigestibly and unapologetically into the center of each ancient story. While regrettable and normalized by our contemporary discourse, it is a sin so abhorrent to God that every time it appears in Scripture, it is inevitably followed by moral chaos, destruction, and death. Each story follows a similar pattern, an unflinching account of the injustices surrounding rape. Each ends in violence and war. Each suggests that rape has extreme social consequences, unraveling relationships between people and nations and leading to social disintegration. The act or threat of raping another spins out of the original perpetrator's control. For Dinah, it leads to mass bloodshed and war with the Philistines. For David and Bathsheba, it leads to a further hardening of David's heart, the death of his faithful servant Uriah, and the death of his first son by Bathsheba. For Tamar, it leads to the death of Amnon and ultimately Absalom, unraveling the Davidic dynasty in civil war. For the Levite's concubine, it leads to tribal war and the destruction of the tribe of Benjamin. Finally, for Lot, it leads to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the death of his wife, and his own sexual acts with his daughters. The Hebrew text is not prescriptive in these moments, but it does ask us to consider the connection between sexual assault and the unraveling destruction of social life.

## Conclusion

After the Stanford rape case disappeared from the news, the U.S. presidential campaigns of 2016 found both sides embroiled in accusations of sexual violations against women. Many people expressed shock about then candidate Donald Trump's treatment of women. Others reviled candidate Hillary Clinton for her association with the actions of Bill Clinton and Anthony Weiner. News programs offered a flurry of commentary about the treatment of women in these cultural texts, so horrible to our modern ears and yet soon forgotten. Whether in ancient or modern script, defending women from sexual violence has little lasting traction in our actual practices. We lose interest as quickly as we decry it. What if our social understanding of rape were as powerful and indigestible as the scriptural stories suggest that it should be? Statistically, it is likely that about one-third of my female parishioners have been molested, raped, or experienced unwanted sexual contact at some point in their lives, and yet sexual violence is not discussed. What if the good Christians in my congregation began sending me questions and thoughts about women such as Tamar, Hagar, Dinah, the concubine, or Bathsheba? Christianity's traditional focus on men having sex with men is a deflection away from the real problem: addressing sexual violence, particularly against women.

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24 Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

25 Kuruvilla, *Genesis*.

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