

The sin of Sodom in the Talmud and Midrash

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ABSTRACT

In this article the Rabbinic reception of the Sodom and Gomorrah tradition, with special reference to the story of Genesis 18-19, is studied as it occurs in the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah. Several passages in Bereshit Rabbah and the Talmud are considered. It is argued that the biblical emphasis on the social aspect of the sin of Sodom was developed by the Rabbis, while its sexual aspect was taken as a symptom of anti-social behaviour. It is concluded that the typical Rabbinic form of the tradition was already shaped in the second century CE, which remained the same until the end of the Talmudic period. Attention is also paid to a number of accompanying motifs, such as the logic of the social motif, the figure of Lot, and the link of King David, and hence also that of the Messiah, to Sodom.

The tradition of Sodom and Gomorrah occurs often in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish literature. In addition to the stories of Genesis 18-19 it is found several times in the Book of Genesis (Gn 10:19; 13:10,12,13; and Gn 14) and many times elsewhere, especially in the prophetic books (Dt 29:22; 32:32; Is 1:9,10; 3:9; 13:19; Jr 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Ez 16:44-58; Am 4:11; Zph 2:9; Hs 11:8; Lm 4:6). This interest in the theme is also found in further Jewish texts, notably in the Apocrypha (Ben Sira 16:7-10; Sap Sal 10:6-9; 19:13-17; 3 Macc 2:5), the Pseudepigrapha (often in the Testaments, several times in Jubilees, and elsewhere), in the works of Philo of Alexandria, the writings of Josephus, and the Rabbinic writings (not to mention the New Testament which can, to a certain extent, also be called 'Jewish literature'). However, in spite of the obvious importance of the Sodom (and Gomorrah) theme in early Jewish literature, no thorough study has as yet, to my knowledge, been published on the topic. In what follows, I propose to contribute to the eventual filling of this gap by focusing on one segment of what we may call 'early Jewish literature'. We will concern ourselves with Rabbinic literature, and investigate how the Sodom theme has been received and used in the two pillars of Rabbinic literature, the Talmud and the Midrash Rabbah. The fact that the latter follows the biblical text of Genesis in a con-

nected way makes it a sensible thing to begin with *Bereshit Rabbah*, and then to proceed to the Talmudic use of the theme. I will also, as we go along, refer to other texts.

Especially two problems related to each other arise in the execution of this enterprise. First, it is extremely difficult to be exhaustive in the absence of complete concordances and precise indices to the material. Second, the corpus is so huge that anyone attempting to work through the whole spectrum would do well to keep modesty in mind. I therefore stress that what goes for Louis Ginzberg, the best guide in a project such as the present one, goes for all studies of this nature. Having referred to the 'luxuriant abundance of the material', he says: 'I can therefore claim completeness for my work only as to content' (Ginzberg 1909:xiv).

What follows here, is an attempt in this spirit to gather those passages relevant to our topic from the Rabbinic literature and to determine how the Sodom and Gomorrah traditions are used there. An endeavour has been made to be as complete as possible, and I hope that I can claim that the material brought together is representative of the use made of these traditions in the Rabbinic current of Jewish thought.

Apart from the many shorter and incidental references to Sodom (and Gomorrah), the literature that now interests us contains two basic texts concerning Sodom. Both are extended texts and focus on the tradition itself. The first is found in the *Midrash Rabbah*, which is obviously important because it comments on the biblical text (in our case the Book of Genesis) verse by verse and is therefore bound to pay much attention to the Sodom story. The second fundamental text is the Talmudic narrative in *Sanhedrin* 109a-b, the elements of which are found in several parallel passages of Rabbinic literature (cf *TSot* 3:11-12; *MekEx* 15:1; *WayyR* 4:1; 7:6; *BemR* 9:24; *MidrQoh* 2:2). We shall use these two texts as the framework for our discussion and refer to others where appropriate. (In keeping with English parlance I use the title 'Rabbi' for both Palestinian and Babylonian authorities.)

In *Bereshit Rabbah* 41:3-10 the separation between Abram and Lot is discussed. Lot is not seen in a very favourable light. He was allowed to accompany Abram, he was saved by Abram when the Sodomites were taken captive by the invading kings, and he was saved from Sodom because of Abram. For these reasons his descendants should have treated Israel kindly instead of badly (*BerR* 41:3). However, good can come from bad, since David was 'found' in Sodom – that is, King David was descended from an inhabitant of Sodom; Lot, via Ruth the Moabitess (*BerR* 41:4; cf 50:10). The strife (רִיב) between the herdsmen of Abram and those of Lot had

known motif, that of fecundity, is also present in our passage. The Valley of Siddim is regarded as having been populated by all kinds of fruit trees. This paradise was terminated when, at the time of the destruction of the valley, the Jordan was blocked and the Dead Sea formed (BerR 42:5).

Lot was captured together with his possessions because he chose to live in Sodom, which is taken to match Proverbs 13:20 ('He who walks with the wise will become wise, but the companion of fools will be harmed'; BerR 42:7). He was eventually saved together with his fellow Sodomites by Abram. This was, of course, achieved with the help of God (BerR 43:3), but other sources say that Abram was helped by angels (Sanh 96a, PRE 27; cf Ginzberg 1909:231-232). This is an important passage since it contains the idea of proselytism (BerR 43:4). The captive adults were returned to their former station, but Abram kept the children, who became proselytes and renounced the wickedness of their Sodomite fathers. This is interpreted by Rabbi Judah in terms of Ezekiel 7:24, that even the worst of the אֲיִלִּים can be 'brought' to become proselytes. While the king of Sodom does not show the proper respect to his saviour (BerR 43:5), Abram swears to take nothing from him, not even a thread or a latchet. Rabbi Abba ben Mammal (fourth century CE; Strack [1931] 1969:126; Bacher [1899] 1965:530-532) relates this to Abram's attitude to the Sodomite children: he will teach them the Torah about נִצַּחַן (Nu 15:38) and דַּבְּרֵי (Dt 25:9) (BerR 43:9).

Bereshit Rabbah 48-49 covers the story of the visitors in Genesis 18. We shall only concentrate on those motifs that are relevant to our present purpose. It is suggested that God is recognised. No oscillation between singular and plural is exploited (BerR 48:10; cf the biblical text and Philo, Abr 131-132). Abraham's visitors tell him explicitly that they do not eat or drink (BerR 48:11), but this stands in some tension with the docetic interpretation given somewhat further on, where they *pretend* to eat (BerR 48:12; cf Philo; Abr 118; QuaestGn 4:9). The second part of Genesis 18, which is directly concerned with Sodom and Gomorrah, is interpreted in chapter 49. In the opinion of Rabbi Jochanan (c 180-279 CE; on his high old age cf Strack [1931] 1969:121-122; Bacher [1892] 1965:205-339), the wickedness of the generation of the flood and that of the Sodomites is basically the same (BerR 49:5; cf Rabbi Jochanan's views on the former generation's sin of violence in Sanh 108a and the opinion that neither group has a share in אֲעֻלַּת הָרַבָּא, Mishnah Sanh 10:3).

The implication of Genesis 18:20-21, that God was at first uninformed about the state of affairs in Sodom, is circumvented by the interpretation of Rabbi Abba ben Kahana (end of the third and beginning of the fourth centuries CE; Strack [1931] 1969:126; Bacher [1896] 1965:475-512) (BerR

49:6). According to him, God, upon receiving the complaint (cry) about the wickedness of the Sodomites, first gave them the opportunity to repent and decided to punish them if they do not (אִם לֹא יִרְעוּ). This is also found in the Targum Neofiti on Gn 18:21, where God is prepared to regard their sins which are known to him as if he did not know them (כִּרְלָא יִרְעוּ), and in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on this verse, where God is prepared to regard the people as innocent if they repent. It also occurs in the Targum Onqelos on Genesis 6:3, which suggests that the possibility of repentance and forgiveness is a fixed element in the tradition of divine punitive action (cf Ginzberg 1900:108-109, who quotes Aphraates to the effect that God wanted the angels to bring the Sodomites to repentance; Schlosser 1973:18-19). So the tradition must be at least three centuries older than Rabbi Abba. His interpretation is augmented by a haggadah, attributed to Rabbi Levi (late third and beginning of the fourth centuries CE; Strack [1931] 1969:124; Bacher [1896] 1965:296-436), about two girls in Sodom. The one was pale as a result of hunger and the other exchanged her bucket of flour for the starving girl's bucket of water. When the Sodomites found this out, they burned the kind girl alive. Therefore the biblical text says, 'her cry', not 'their cry'. The midrash is developed from two words in the text of Genesis 18:20-21, and not from one only (cf Mulder 1970:1-38, who points out three expressions in the biblical text to which the haggadah is variously attached). First, there is a play on the 'great' (רַבָּה, *rabbā*) cry over Sodom and the word for 'girl', (רִיבָה, *ribā*). The words of verse 20, זַעֲקַת סָרַם וְעַמְרָה, כִּי רִיבָה, are then read, זַעֲקַת סָרַם וְעַמְרָה כִּי רִיבָה: 'The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah because of the girl'. The second foothold for the haggadah is the third person feminine singular suffix attached to זַעֲקָה, where one would expect a third person masculine plural (as some textual witnesses indeed attest). This kind of wickedness went on even for the 25 years preceding the destruction, during which God gave the Sodomites ample seismic warning without bringing them to repent. The story is an example of the cruelty of the Sodomites, which manifests as social oppression and stems from their gluttony and selfishness (for the parallel in Sanh 109b, cf below).

Abraham's intercession for Sodom (BerR 49:8-14; cf 39:6 and its parallel in WayyR 10:1) is not effective because there are no righteous people in Sodom. This is the opinion of Rabbi Jochanan, based on the spelling of צַדִּיקִים (*saddiqim*) with reference to Sodom. The word is always spelled defectively when associated with Sodom (cf Gn 18:24,26,28, where the *yod* of the final syllable is lacking). This indicates that even their righteousness is defective (BerR 49:9). As to the question of why Abraham stopped at the

number ten (Gn 18:32), three answers are given: Ten is the minimum required for a prayer service of which Sodom is in need; eight are not enough to avoid the catastrophe, as shown by the fact that the eight people in Noah's ark were not enough to avoid the deluge (Gn 6:18); Abraham thought there would be ten good people, namely Lot, his wife, his four daughters (*sic*; according to this strand of tradition he had four; cf Ginzberg 1900:109, who quotes Ephraem and Jerome to show that the Christian fathers also knew this tradition) and their husbands (BerR 49:13).

The exposition of Genesis 19 (BerR 50-51) begins with the problem of the 'angels' in Genesis 18 and 19. One angel does not perform more than one function, and the reason why there are now (Gn 19:1) only two left, is that Michael, who had brought the good news of a child for Sarah, has in the meantime departed. Gabriel was to destroy Sodom and Raphael was to rescue Lot (BerR 50:2). A variant of this tradition is found in Baba Mezia 86b, where Raphael is seen as the healer of Abraham after the latter's circumcision, while Michael accompanied Gabriel to Sodom without taking part in the destruction (cf Shab 67a, where the two angels are called Sharlai and Amarlai in an incantation). Various explanations are given for the fact that the three are called 'men' in Genesis 18 and 'angels' in Genesis 19. One of these is that they appeared as men while the Shechinah was above them, but as angels as soon as the Shechinah departed. This shows that the question of who the visitors to Abraham exactly were was answered by using the concept of the Shechinah.

Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom when the angels arrived. That indicates that he was the chief judge (cf also the verb שפס in Gn 19:9). The other judges of Sodom were perverters of justice, as one was called (מזלי רינא שרף, שרקר, שקרורי, שקרורא, זכנך – שרף, שרקר, שקרורי, שקרורא, זכנך; cf Sanh 109b, Ginzberg 1909:246-247). Lot offered the angels hospitality, a virtue he had learnt from Abraham when he was still with him (BerR 50:4). The agreement among the Sodomites to subject all strangers to homosexual mob rape and then to rob their money (BerR 50:7; a tradition ascribed to Rabbi Bebai, c 320 CE; Strack [1931] 1969:126; Bacher [1899] 1965:667-669) was undermined by Lot in that he tried to prevent the Sodomites from assaulting his guests. This, together with the fact that the mob call out disapprovingly that Lot wanted to 'keep playing judge' (Gn 19:9: (ישפט שפוט)), provides the biblical basis for the haggadah that Lot was the chief judge.

The angels were punished by God for saying, 'We are about to destroy this place' (Gn 19:13), either because they revealed God's secret about

Sodom (Rabbi Nachman, c 329 CE? Strack [1931] 1969:127), or because of the overbearing nature of their utterance (Rabbi Chama ben Chanina, third century CE; Strack [1931] 1969:123; Bacher [1892] 1965:447-476) (BerR 50:9). At this point (BerR 50:10) the same is said about David's originating from Sodom, as in the exposition of Genesis 13:6 (BerR 41:4; cf above).

Lot still lingered because of the wealth he possessed in the city. Several examples of the motif in the Old Testament are mentioned, namely that riches can lead to destruction. Thus the well-known motif of the wealth of Sodom is here applied to Lot and generalised with reference to Ecclesiastes 5:12 (BerR 50:11). When Lot is eventually saved, it is not because of his own merit, but because of Abraham's. In fact, Abraham is so much more meritorious than Lot that the latter cannot even escape to the mountains (Gn 19:19) to live near so good a man.

Genesis 19:22-23 is interpreted to mean that the destruction took place on the sixteenth of Nisan when the sun as well as the moon are visible, because both the sun and the moon were worshipped in Sodom (BerR 50:12).

The destruction itself is interpreted in the first half of the next chapter (BerR 51:1-6). Genesis 19:23-24 is related to Psalm 58:9 by reading *המטיר* (v 24) as a perfect tense: 'The sun rose when Lot came to Zoar, and the Lord *had* caused brimstone and fire from the Lord, from heaven, to rain on Sodom and Gomorrah'. Accordingly, the cities were destroyed before sunrise, which makes the link with Psalm 58:9 possible: A woman's miscarriage that 'does not see the sun' (i e never lives, cf Ec 6:3-5) can be interpreted to refer to an abortion carried out at night by an adulterous woman for fear of being found out (cf Pes 93b for another interpretation of the rising sun in Gn 19:23). Therefore the demise of Sodom and Gomorrah is likened to the result of illicit sexual behaviour, which comments on the sexual aspect of their sins (BerR 51:1; cf Qid 70a).

The rain of fire and brimstone is also interpreted by means of the typical Rabbinic techniques. Rabbi Abin (fourth century CE; Strack [1931] 1969:128; Bacher [1899] 1965:653) compared the fire and brimstone (Gn 19:24) to a woman baking bread in an oven. Her own child takes a loaf with her permission and another child removes coals without being stopped. The former is God's own children who wanted bread and was granted it in a rain of bread (Ex 16:4), and the latter is the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who wanted fire and was granted it in a rain of fire. Freedman (1951:444-445) infers from this comparison that Sodom wanted the coals to injure others. This is probably correct, because the comparison obviously intends to say that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah asked for what they got. As Israel asked for bread (Ex 16:2-3) and were given it, so Sodom and

Gomorrah asked for fire and were given it. It can only be taken *in malam partem*. According to Rabbi Chanina ben Pazzi nothing evil descends from above, which, according to Freedman (1951:446), means that the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah was so great that in this case an exception was made (BeR 51:3).

The root **הפך**, often associated with Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament (Dt 29:22; Is 13:19; Jr 49:18; 50:40), is also attended to in the midrash (BeR 51:4). Rabbi Shemuel ben Nachman (third century CE; Strack [1931] 1969:124; Bacher [1892] 1965:477-551) interpreted the overthrow of the cities in the light of Job 28:9, where God is said in the parallelism to overturn (**הפך**) a rock/mountains. From this can be inferred that Sodom and the other four cities of the Pentapolis were built on one rock (cf the singular **שׁוֹלְמֵי** in Job 28:9) and were overturned by the angel (sc Gabriel). The fact that the plants were also destroyed (Gn 19:25, **צִמָּח הוֹאֲרָמָה**), is interpreted to the effect that the barrenness of the region extends even to the atmosphere of the Sodom vicinity. For, according to Rabbi Jehoshua ben Levi (first half of the third century CE; Strack [1931] 1969:120; Bacher [1892] 1965:124-194), the rain that falls over Sodom, when collected and used for irrigation elsewhere, does not promote the growth of plants.

The flight of Lot and his family is briefly treated in the following paragraphs (BerR 51:5-7). Lot's wife became a pillar of salt because she betrayed the presence of their visitors by asking her neighbours for some salt to serve to the guests (BerR 51:5; cf 50:4; cf Ginzberg 1909:254). A good word, however, is found for Lot. He was saved because 'God remembered Abraham' (Gn 19:29). This is taken to imply that God remembered something that Lot had done for Abraham. The good thing done by Lot is inferred from the fact that Scripture says nothing about Lot objecting to the lie told by Abram when he claimed to be Sarai's brother (cf Gn 12:10-20). This happened before their parting and therefore Lot must have known about it. Somewhat ironically, therefore, it is counted in Lot's favour that he covered up a lie, while he is generally not judged very favourably (BerR 41:3-7; cf p 119; also Jub 16:8-9 as opposed to Sap 10:6; further references given by Ginzberg 1925:240, n 171). The fact that Genesis 19:29 says that Lot was saved **מִתּוֹךְ הַהִפְיָכָה**, is interpreted by Rabbi Shemuel ben Nachman to imply that Lot lived in all of the cities at various times because all were part of the **הִפְיָכָה**, while others were of the opinion that he had vested interests in the other four cities. Therefore Lot is regarded as having had a part in the wealth of Sodom.

The last paragraphs of the chapter are devoted to Lot in the cave. First,

David's prayer when he entered the cave, that God should not destroy (אל תשחח, Ps 57:1), is associated with the fact that earlier a similar prayer was answered for others, namely Lot and his daughters (BerR 51:7). This reference makes sense in the context, because Rabbi Shemuel's opinion about the offspring of Lot is quoted next (BerR 51:8). The girls thought that nobody but themselves had survived a worldwide catastrophe (a haggadah also known to the Christian fathers; cf Ginzberg 1900:110-111, who quotes Ephraem, Ie 72B, to this effect) and wanted to preserve 'seed' (זרע, Gn 19:32). According to Rabbi Shemuel the choice of the word זרע has a deeper meaning and refers to the Messiah. The Messiah will be descended from David, David was descended from Ruth, and Ruth, as a Moabitess, in turn was descended from Lot through his elder daughter. The messianic significance is further underlined by the opinion of Rabbi Jehudah ben Shimon (fourth century CE; Strack [1931] 1969:129; Bacher [1899] 1965:160-220) concerning the wine given to Lot. Since Joel 4:18 says that the mountains will drip of wine 'in that day' (כִּי יוֹם הַהוּא), the drinking of wine in a cave on a mountain must have a special significance. 'That day' refers to the coming of the Messiah. Now, because of the fruitfulness of the land, the Sodomites had an abundance of wine which they hid in caves. This is how the girls got hold of wine, and so the whole episode becomes a pointer to the time of the Messiah. Even in the midst of catastrophe, punishment and misery the rabbis find the seed of hope for a glorious future. What Rudolph (1966:218) has said, in the context of the Sodom and Gomorrah tradition, of Hosea 11:9, should be adapted for the concluding paragraphs of the interpretation of the Sodom story in the Midrash Rabbah: 'Hier ist Evangelium im Midrasch'.

Our next major Rabbinic text on Sodom is found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin 109a-b*. The passage on Sodom begins with the declaration that the generation of Sodom has no part in the world to come, as the generation of the flood (Sanh 108a), the generation of the dispersion (Sanh 109a) and the generation of the wilderness (Sanh 110b) likewise have no part in the world to come. In all four cases an overbearing attitude is obvious from their actions (explicitly called so in the first case, Sanh 108a, and in the third, Sanh 109a). Rabbi Jehudah (died 299 CE; Strack [1931] 1969:125) analysed the wickedness of the Sodomites into four types. The first is bodily sin (in other words sexual immorality), which is derived from Genesis 39:9 where the term הוֹרְעָה, referring to sexual misdemeanour, occurs. This is equated to רְעִים in Genesis 13:13, which refers to the great sins of Sodom. The second type is sin with money, which is derived from Deuteronomy 15:9, where it is said that it will be reckoned as sin (חטא) to

someone who denies financial help to the poor. This is linked to the same root (חטאים) used in Genesis 13:13 as a description of the Sodomites. The Sodomites were also guilty of blasphemy, which is derived not from another text, but from ליהרהר in Genesis 13:13 itself, because this shows that their sins were directed against God. The fourth type of wickedness is bloodshed, which is derived from the fact that the word מאר in Genesis 13:13 is also used in 2 Kings 21:16, where it is stated that Manasseh 'shed innocent blood exceedingly (הרבה מאר)'. These four types are also found in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis 13:13: the men of Sodom were wicked in their wealth (כסמוןהון), they offended in their bodies (בגויותהון), they shed innocent blood, and they rebelled against God by practising foreign worship. The first two types occur in the Targum Onqelos (Gn 13:13), while the Targum Neofiti mentions three (revealing their nakedness and shedding of innocent blood [cf the margin, רם וכי], plus practicing foreign worship). This suggests that Rabbi Jehudah's four 'sins of Sodom' existed as a group at least a century earlier than his time (the third century CE), although we cannot be precise in this.

Once again we see that the socio-economic aspect is prominent in the interpretation of the Sodom and Gomorrah tradition. Two of the four types can be classified as such, and this aspect of Sodomite wickedness is stressed in both the Talmud and the targumim. This is essentially the same emphasis as that found in the Sodom story, the prophets and the other Jewish corpusses that we have studied. For these reasons we can agree with Bowker (1969:190-191) who, in his discussion of Pseudo-Jonathan Genesis 13:13, states that 'the essential nature of the offence was that the natural order was inverted or reversed'. However, in my opinion this is not saying enough and should be specified further. The inversion of the natural order is essentially anti-social. That is why the biblical text itself uses the motif of inversion of the sexual order, notably to express the motif of inversion of the social order of hospitality. The first is an aspect of the second, not *vice versa*. This has been rightly recognised in the Jewish tradition reflected in the targumim and in the Talmud, and it explains why most of the haggadot concentrate on the socio-economic wickedness of the Sodomites.

The motif of haughtiness is again found with reference to the attitude of the Sodomites. They developed hubris because of the goodness of God. This is inferred from Job 28:5-8, which speaks of bread from the earth (the motif of fecundity), the earth being burned underneath (seen as the fire motif), and the richness of the earth in sapphires and gold dust (the motif of wealth). All of these are well known in the Sodom and Gomorrah traditions. According to our text, wealth led to selfishness and emanated in

xenophobia (the same sequence is found in Josephus, Ant 1:194). So they forbade travelling in their land in accordance with Job 28:4, which speaks of **לְנִשְׁכָּחִים מְנִי רַגְלִי**, 'those who are forgotten of foot'. In parallel versions the reference to Job 28:4 is meant as judgement over Sodom: God will cause them to be forgotten and a stream (i e of fire) will come over them (cf TSota 3:11-12; MekEx 15:1). Another parallel (WayyR 4:1) combines the xenophobia of the Sodomites with the motifs of hubris, wealth and injustice by using the Sodomites as an example of the meaning of Ecclesiastes 3:16 ('wickedness was in the place of justice'; cf also Midr Qoh 2:2). The same tradition is preserved a third time in the Midrash Rabbah (if we count BerR as well). This time (BemR 9:24) the Job text is combined with the clear-cut reference in Ezekiel 16:48-49 to the wealth as well as the socio-economic complacency of the Sodomites, and God says that he will sweep them away as they want to sweep away the 'alien foot' (i e, travellers) from their territory. *The biblical emphasis on the social aspect of their wickedness, stemming as it does from the important function of the motif of hospitality in both the first and the second halves of the Sodom story, is continually and thoroughly exploited by the Rabbinic use of the Sodom and Gomorrah tradition.*

Returning to our text in Sanhedrin 109a-b, we find several *haggadot* expounding the cruelty and perverted sense of justice that obtained in Sodom, but also telling how the Sodomites could, on occasion, be out-smarted.

1 If a person was so poor that he had only one ox, he had to tend all the oxen of Sodom for one day; if he had no oxen, he had to toil even harder and tend them for two days. This absurd perversion of justice was unmasked by an orphan (one who is socially very weak) who killed all the oxen while on duty and helped himself to two rather than one hide on the basis of the principle that the end (consequence) of the law must match its beginning: no oxen - two days, no oxen - two hides.

2 The Sodomites would make their wickedness appear trivial by all openly stealing one brick or one onion at a time from one owner, and so rob him of his property by their combined effect. This represents the principle of creeping injustice which seems too small to punish, but which amounts to great wickedness.

3 The four judges of Sodom with their crooked names also appear in this text. Their judgements are the opposite of justice. They would rule in favour of a man who assaults his neighbour's wife and turn her over to the assailant who may make her pregnant 'for' her husband. *Here the sexual motif clearly occurs in the service of the social motif.* Basically it is what hap-

pens in the Sodom story itself: the Sodomites are sinners in sexual respect, but this is a manifestation of their social wickedness.

4 They would pervert justice in favour of one who maims another's donkey.

5 They would make a complainant pay his assailant a 'bleeding' fee instead of making the aggressor pay damages.

6 A person who crosses into their territory by ferry had to pay one $\text{ל$, and whoever crossed the water on his own had to pay two $\text{ל$ (later in the text the fees are respectively four and eight $\text{ל$, but the principle of double fees for less trouble given to the Sodomites, i.e. of the perversion of justice into its opposite, remains the same). A man who protested at this injustice was assaulted, literally experiencing injury added to injustice, and was made to pay his injurers for the injury: Injustice - injury - injustice.

7 Abraham's slave, Eliezer, suffered the same injustice, but himself wounded the judge in order to be paid the 'bleeding' money due to his own attacker. This again serves to demonstrate the palpable injustice which defeats itself.

8 Eliezer also outwitted the Sodomites when they required him to lie on their notorious bed. If a visitor was too tall for the bed, they would 'cut off some part of him ($\text{ג$ $\text{י$ $\text{מ$ $\text{נ$ ה)'; if he was too short, they would 'stretch him'. On the grounds of an oath sworn by him never to sleep on a bed, Eliezer refused to lie down. This shows how he saw through their wickedness.

9 Strangers would be given a *dinar* bearing the name of the donor, but no food. When the stranger died, each would come and take his money back. Why bother to give the money if they intend to get it back? - This is only understandable as a way of depicting the mockery made of social justice by tokenism. The same applies to the cases cited above where an assailant may make a woman pregnant as if doing her husband a favour (no 3), and where 'bleeding' money is mentioned (no 5).

10 No Sodomite was allowed to invite strangers to a feast. When Eliezer came there, he entered of his own accord and continually claimed to have been invited by the man sitting next to him, until all had fled for fear of being prosecuted. This haggadah not only shows that Eliezer was more resourceful than the Sodomites, but also depicts the cruel people as cowards and thereby testifies to an insight in the psychological make-up of the social bully.

11 The last of the string of haggadot in our text is the story of the girl who dared to feed a poor man (in the parallel of BerR 49:6 she feeds a poor girl; cf p 122). According to this version of the story, she was daubed with honey

and made to stand on a wall until the bees came and consumed her. Here the link between רבבה (*rabbā*) in Genesis 18:20 and ריבה (*ribā*), 'girl' (Aramaic text: רבתא [*ribtā*] = [רביתא [*ribyṯā*, *rḥitā*] = Hebrew ריבה [*ribā*]) is attributed to Rab (died 247 CE; Bacher [1913] 1967:1-33) by his pupil Rabbi Jehudah ben Yechezkel (mid-third century CE; Bacher [1913] 1967:47-52). Here the girl's name is not given, but she is called Peletit in the Targumic version of the haggadah (TgJ1 on Gn 18:20-21) and in Pirque deRabbi Eliezer. In the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan the penalty of death by burning for anyone who feeds strangers is built into the midrashic rendering of Genesis 18:20, and the cry of the maiden Peletit is mentioned in verse 21. The same story is also told in Pirque deRabbi Eliezer 25. Here we have elements of both the earlier versions, pointing to a conflation of the various forms: like in Sanhedrin 109b (and the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan), she feeds a poor man (עניא, not another girl) but, as in the version found in the Midrash Rabbah, she is burned to death, not devoured by bees. In all of these cases the extreme cruelty of the anti-social attitude of the Sodomites is illustrated. It is difficult to determine the origin of this haggadah. Mulder (1970:1-38) thinks that it probably originated in the school of Rabbi Aqiba in order to explain Genesis 18:20-21. It is possible, but the earliest literary manifestations of the story in Sanhedrin 109b and Bereshit Rabbah refer us to rabbis of the middle of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries respectively. The story is obviously linked to Genesis 18:20-21, but it is not helpful in *explaining* the difficulty here, namely the implication that God did not know what was going on. In fact, it contributes nothing to this end. Verse 21 would still imply that God needed to come and learn facts that he did not know and in spite of the story we would still be where we were. I would rather say that the haggadah looks in quite another direction and that it *seizes upon* the text in Genesis 18:20-21 in order to give its own thrust a biblical foothold. This thrust is to illustrate that the 'great' (רבבה) evil of Sodom is social cruelty.

Our witnesses point to the conclusion that the typical Rabbinic form of the Sodom and Gomorrah traditions was already shaped in the second century CE, and that this remained essentially the same in the third and fourth centuries. The typical Rabbinic form of the tradition finds its expression in the genre of haggadah, in which the values of Rabbinic Judaism are expounded in narratives based on biblical texts. The Scriptures, forming as they do for the rabbis a unitary network of related references, may therefore be brought to bear on one another in order to articulate the beliefs of what had become mainstream Judaism. In this way the Sodom and Gomorrah traditions are compared to, and interpreted in conjunction

with, several other words of Scripture. As to content, we may sum up our findings about the major motifs and their function as follows:

- 1 In Rabbinic circles the wickedness of the Sodomites was proverbial in a formal sense, at least since the second century CE.
- 2 Rabbi Jehudah's idea of 'bodily' sin, the sexual aspect, is well attested.
- 3 It is, however, mostly subsumed under his idea of the Sodomite 'sin with money' and 'with bloodshed' – that is, the socio-economic aspect of the wickedness of Sodom is predominant in the Rabbinic texts.
- 4 The social aspect is developed by the logic: wealth - parsimony - social oppression.
- 5 Rabbi Jehudah finds this blasphemous at the same time because it is ultimately directed against God.
- 6 The fact that David is 'found' in Sodom, that Abram makes proselytes out of Sodomites, and that Lot's union with his daughters can become a pointer to the Messiah, shows that good can come from evil.
- 7 Lot is usually seen in an unfavourable light, but a good word can, on occasion, be found for him.
- 8 Angels are seen as superhuman creatures and a docetic interpretation of their appearance may be used to remain true to this belief.

If my observations are correct, the importance of the social aspect of the sin of Sodom in Rabbinic literature is paralleled by the fact that this view also occurs in the prophetic writings. (Flavius Josephus, too, emphasises this aspect, cf Ant 1:194-206.) In Genesis 19 the social motif is also manifested in the sexual motif and the latter is thus subsumed under the former because it serves as a vehicle and has no importance of its own, independent of the social motif. We would therefore be entitled to say that the interpretation of the Sodom tradition by the sages develops the fundamental idea of the Genesis story itself and of the prophetic use of the theme. This, in conclusion, leads to the intriguing question: What happened afterwards? What made it possible for the Church Father, Saint Augustine, to find *stupra in masculos*, homosexuality, to be the only sin of the Sodomites (Civ 16:30)? And why does our own parlance, when we as Jews and Christians speak of 'sodomy', reflect only the influence of Augustine and nothing of the sages and the prophets? But these are questions that call for an investigation into the Sodom tradition in the other areas of early Jewish and Christian literature.

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