



Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-29) on the Internet

The Implications of the Internet for the Study of the Bible

Susanne Scholz
The College of Wooster

Disclaimer

Unless otherwise noted, the websites discussed in this article were active on the day of publication. Due to the transitory nature of some websites, some of these links may no longer be active. The opinions expressed in these websites are not necessarily those of the author or the Journal.

Introduction

[1] When the Internet became accessible to the wider American public during the 1990s, people reacted in several ways. One group worried about the societal consequences of this technology. They imagined that in the near future people would become incapable to communicate directly with one another and instead prefer to share their most intimate experiences via email and in the chat rooms of the Internet. This group feared that people would turn into emotionally alienated, digitally dependent creatures.

[2] In contrast to this rather pessimistic assessment, another group greeted the Internet enthusiastically. This reaction swept over the United States. The Internet appeared to be a new god, providing ultimate freedom from time and space. Connected to a computer with a modem, one could be anywhere. The Internet promised access to the vast treasures of human civilizations from the past and present. People anticipated eagerly that computers would soon provide access to huge amounts of information and knowledge with a simple key stroke. Everything outside the realm of the Internet appeared to be extremely limited and removed from society's bright future. Reaching the remotest corners of the planet, the World Wide Web (WWW) shrunk any distance to a digital moment of transmission. For many people the Internet seemed the perfect technological tool that might save them from human finitude. No religion, no theological concept, and no biblical story has provided this collective sense of salvation in recent decades.

[3] A mediating position has certainly been another reaction to the Internet. By now many people have accepted the presence of the Internet in their daily lives. Even though they do not believe that the digital world will change the world as we know it, they use the Web to see what people in Cyberspace do and say. This response to the Internet is more cautious compared to the other two reactions. However, over time it might become the general attitude toward the WWW.

[4] Initially, the enthusiastic response dominated the assessment of the digital world. The worriers were barely audible. Who wanted to be on their side when the Internet would allow us to overcome all human limitations? However, only a few years after the American public has accepted the presence of .com in radio, television, and address books, the situation seems to have changed. The Internet is losing its mystery. Even those speculating in the stock market have become hesitant to invest into emerging Internet companies. Research has also shown that factors, such as class, race, and gender, limit people's access to computers and thus the Internet. Digital practices reflect existing social structures (see Ebo). The technology-eager United States has sobered up from the initial euphoric response to the Web.<1>

[5] The Internet has still grown enormously. Personal, organizational, and commercial Web pages

abound. Selling and buying have become regular online procedures. Most searches lead to thousands of Web pages, which require days of reading or a systematic elimination process to refine one's search. Some scholars compare the relative anarchy of the Web with the early stages of printing when publishers had not yet invented books but faced only unnumbered and loose sheets. It was then that printers invented a method to organize the stacks of individual papers. They enclosed them in covers, included tables of content, chapters, and indexes, and learned to advertise their products. Similarly, the Web is still in its early stages, consisting of "an undifferentiated mass of information in cyberspace." It is not yet "categorized, organised, packaged and presented in a way that makes it a pleasurable and satisfying prospect for today's information buyers" (Spender: 60). At the same time the Internet is an uncensored medium. If one has the money and the skill to create a Web page, one can do so. In that sense the Internet is a "great equalizer" (for a critical assessment, see Wolf). Opinions and issues become visible that often remained more hidden in the pre-Internet culture. Thus, the digital world represents an exquisite environment to examine contemporary perceptions and views on almost any subject.

[6] The Bible has also been a subject on the Internet. Biblical topics, names, and even particular texts appear in thousands of Web pages. Organizations and individuals create Web pages to inform the Internet public about their biblical interpretations, religious views and convictions. In other words, the Internet is also a rich storage house for understanding the role of the Bible in contemporary culture.

The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah on the Internet

[7] Many people, even those with limited biblical knowledge, know of Sodom and Gomorrah. Although those people may not remember that the story is told in the book of Genesis, they probably know that the cities were destroyed for some sort of evil doing, often associated with sexual depravity. It is, therefore, not surprising that a search on the Internet for "Sodom and Gomorrah" yields thousands of hits. To be precise, on July 18, 1999 the search engine *Excite* offered 7,219 and *Yahoo* 4,594 hits. This number is huge, particularly if compared to the scholarly work on Genesis 19. For example, *Old Testament Abstracts*, the thrice-yearly bibliography of literature relating to the Old Testament, lists twenty-six entries related to Genesis 19:1-29 for the ten-year period from 1989 to 1998. Less than thirty scholarly articles discuss the story in contrast to thousands of Web pages. The comparison indicates that Sodom and Gomorrah play a significant role in the imagination of Internet users.

[8] Many Web pages on Sodom and Gomorrah fall into three categories. The first category contains Web pages that offer literal readings of Genesis 19 to argue for or against homosexuality. Characterized as "prooftexting," this approach is a common interpretive method for typically non-academic sites. The second category are those Web sites that use archaeology to prove the historicity of Sodom and Gomorrah. The third category are Web sites that have commercial interests related to Genesis 19. The following analysis explores sample Web pages of these categories towards a threefold purpose. The examination demonstrates how Sodom and Gomorrah have infiltrated popular digital culture. It assesses the importance of the digital appropriations for biblical studies. And it helps to understand the role of the Bible in contemporary society.

[9] It was not always easy to decide which Web page deserved detailed scrutiny. Over time, however, four criteria emerged that determined the value of a Web page. The first criterion related to the digital life span of a Web page. All Web pages examined in this article have been available since January 1998. Some authors changed the look of their site but they usually did not change the content. The second criterion concerned the depth of the argumentation. The selected Web pages offer better discussions than others. The third criterion established whether a Web site contained an unexpected or unusual appropriation of Sodom and Gomorrah. The fourth criterion related to the aesthetic quality of a Web page. Most Web pages examined in this article have a particularly intriguing look. All criteria helped to select representative Web pages for the analysis about Sodom and Gomorrah on the Internet.

Prooftexting for and against Homosexuality

[10] Numerous Web pages appropriate the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in their discussions on homosexuality. Created by religious organizations and individuals, some Web pages argue for the rejection of homosexuality, whereas others plead for acceptance. All of them illustrate the religious and cultural function of Genesis 19 inside and outside the digital world (for examples from the printed world, see Goldberg, Hallam). The Web pages also exemplify that regardless of their view on homosexuality many Web sites share a similar interpretive premise. Reading Genesis 19, authors of Web pages assume that they simply repeat what "the Bible says." They construct their "message" under the banner of a literal reading. They fail to understand that as readers they are involved in the interpretive process before they even open the Bible. They are the ones who choose and arrange the various biblical passages to support

their particular views. <2>

[11] Three Web pages illustrate the anti-gay stance. The home page of "Christian Friends" (<http://www.lovejesus.org/>), a group of born-again Christians, provides a link to a section called "Devotional Reading." An article on "Sodomy" appears in the collection. Ben Drake is the credited author. The characterization of "Sodomy" as "devotional reading" has an ironic twist which is probably not intended (<http://www.lovejesus.org/sodomy.htm>). The essay explains that the word "sodomy" has its etymological origin in Genesis 19. Based on this explanation, the page describes the content of the biblical tale. Drake stresses that no other sin but sodomy "warrants this kind of treatment," namely the destruction of the two cities. The article concludes: "Here we see there was one righteous in Sodom (apparently none in Gomorrah) and as soon as he was removed, all the rest were destroyed. THAT is what God thinks of this awful sin."

[12] The "Christian Friends" and the author of this particular article, Drake, maintain that Sodom was destroyed because the inhabitants committed what the contemporary word "sodomy" signifies. Drake's preconceived notion about the meaning of "sodomy" informs the interpretation. Accordingly, homosexuality was already rejected during biblical times. The argumentation, however, indicates that Drake is not aware of his hermeneutical reading process. He believes to present what the Bible says about "sodomy." He does not realize that he projects the contemporary meaning of "sodomy" back into the biblical story to get the interpretation that supports his view on homosexuality. In other words, Drake fails to understand that his preconceived view about homosexuality determines the outcome of his interpretation.

[13] Another Web page argues similarly. It is more informative than the previous one because of its detailed argumentation. Thus, it exposes its hermeneutical assumptions more clearly than Drake's essay. The author, Mark A. Copeland, calls himself "simply a Christian," who is a preacher of a congregation in Florida. He offers what he calls a "non-sectarian approach to the Scriptures" (http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Mark_A_Copeland/back.htm). Copeland believes that his interpretations "are simply the result of my own personal studies of God's Word" and thus unhindered by denominational or creedal doctrine. He believes that "God has spoken fully and completely through His Son Jesus Christ and His apostle and prophets whose words are contained in the Bible." From the beginning then, his interpretive approach is evident. Copeland considers the Bible as divinely inspired as the Word of God.

[14] This naïve hermeneutical stance is carried out in an essay entitled "Homosexuality—A Christian Perspective" (http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Mark_A_Copeland/hom.htm), one of Copeland's numerous "Executable Outlines" (http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Mark_A_Copeland/home.htm). The page acknowledges that his discussion of homosexuality is "an effort to speak the truth in love on a volatile subject." The essay contains seven sections. One addresses specifically "What the Bible Teaches About Homosexuality" (http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Mark_A_Copeland/hom/hom_03.htm).

[15] The discussion begins with a question: "Assuming that one accepts the Bible to be the Word of God, and as such the final authority on issues it discusses, what then does it have to say about the subject of homosexuality?" Posed as a question, the statement maintains not only that the Bible is the final authority, but also that the Bible addresses the issue of homosexuality. Copeland sees himself as the neutral deliverer of the biblical message on homosexuality because he accepts the Bible as the word of God. The Bible "tells" him what to believe, a major interpretive premise of the fundamentalist approach (see Boone, Wilcox).

[16] This conviction shapes the argumentation of the whole essay. Quoting from the New Testament (2 Pet 2:6), Copeland asks why the two cities Sodom and Gomorrah suffered such "unique judgment." He answers his question by emphasizing the importance of Genesis 19:5. This verse proves that "homosexual conduct was 'a grievous sin' in the days of the patriarchs." The Sodomites sinned because they wanted to know the visitors "carnally." Copeland rejects the notion of "homosexual theologians" that the "sin" of the Sodomites was their inhospitable behavior towards the visitors.

[17] Three basic ideas characterize Copeland's interpretation. First, he suggests that only homosexual theologians consider inhospitality the sin of the Sodomites. Disliking those who present the argument, Copeland simply rejects the interpretive possibility. However, several commentators consider inhospitality as the "sin" of the Sodomites without disclosing their sexual orientation (Parker: 6-8; Wenham: 54-55; Visotzky: 77-78). Second, Copeland underlines the importance of the verb "to know." He refers to Genesis 4:1, 17, Lot's response in Genesis 19:6-7, and other texts from the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Testament (e.g. Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Rom 1:18-23) to ascertain that the verb means "to have

sexual intercourse." The biblical connections allow him to regard Genesis 19 as a story against homosexuality. Third, Copeland stresses that the Bible is the Word of God. Consequently, one either accepts the Bible as the Word of God and its "simple" message or one rejects both.

I can understand that those who do not believe in God or who do not accept the Bible as the Word of God would strongly disagree with such an evaluation of homosexuality. . . . May those who profess to accept the Bible as the last word never hesitate to accept what it says, no matter, how "politically incorrect" our society might say it is.

Caught in this dualism of either accepting or rejecting the Bible as the word of God, Copeland understands those who do not consider the Bible as the word of God. He appreciates their decision to reject the biblical message. However, Copeland accepts the message since he believes that the Bible is the Word of God.

[18] A third Web page further illustrates how Web sites mention Genesis 19 to argue against homosexuality. The page belongs to a radio program called "Cutting Edge," which is "dedicated to warning and informing God's people" (<http://cuttingedge.org/radio.html>). Belonging to a "fundamental independent Baptist Church," the site maintains that the Bible is "the only revelation of God and His Son, Jesus Christ." Different from the previously described Web page, this page does not simply cite biblical texts to dismiss homosexuality. The page also claims to present "spiritual insights into 'The New World Order' so startling you'll never look at the news the same way again." Thus, Genesis 19 is only a part of a much larger argument. Since the end of the world and the second arrival of the Messiah are near, the program has a threefold goal. It "explain(s) the goals and aspirations of the New World Order," shows "how its implementation will affect the average American citizen and family," and explains "how families are being influenced now, before we actually move into this system." In other words, the page belongs to a group of fundamentalist Christians who present a political analysis from their particular Christian perspective.

[19] One section relates directly to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and is entitled "America: Guilty of Sin of Sodom" (<http://cuttingedge.org/ce1063.html>). The section is the transcript of a show once aired by radio host David Bay. He parallels the situation of the biblical towns Sodom and Gomorrah to contemporary America:

The sin of Sodom . . . [was] taking control of that society. Everyone was taught in every state institution, from schools to churches, that homosexuality was just as valid and desirable as heterosexuality. . . . This same situation is now developing in America, as we move to teach our children the same lie straight out of the pit of hell. If the Lord Jesus Christ tarries, America will produce the same type of society as did Sodom and Gomorrah. America is the new Sodom.

The radio host obviously criticizes the growing acceptance of homosexuality, which in his view was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. It once led to the destruction of the two cities. Now it threatens the United States of America, the new Sodom. Like the previous two examples, this Web page advances an anti-gay stance with an interpretation of Genesis 19. Claiming to repeat only the biblical message, the author does not acknowledge that his opposition to homosexuality shapes his reading of the Bible.

[20] The anti-gay stance is not the only one found on the Internet. Genesis 19 is a popular text also for those who counter this view. They, too, post their Web pages. Three Web sites shall illustrate their argumentation. The Web page of the "Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches," "a worldwide fellowship of Christian congregations serving all people, with a special outreach to the world's g/l/b/t communities" (<http://www.ufmcchq.com/menu.htm>) provides a link to a paper entitled, "Homosexuality and the Bible . . . Bad News? Or Good News?" (<http://www.ufmcchq.com/handb.htm>) by Nathan L. Meckley. He explains that "sadly, the Bible is often used as a weapon to 'bash' gays and lesbians." In a reconciliatory tone he emphasizes that "such hurtful things are not a reflection of Christ, or the way God wants the church to be, or even what the Bible really says." In fact, Meckley maintains that the Bible supports gays and lesbians: "The Bible does have Good News for gays and lesbians, and it does not say what you may have thought it did about homosexuals." He explicates this position in a paper entitled, "Sodom, Creation, and the Law" (<http://www.ufmcchq.com/sodom/htm>). There he states that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality. According to Meckley, this view is a "misinterpretation of Scripture." It ignores biblical references which describe the reasons for the destruction of the two cities. For instance, Ezekiel 16:49-50, "an equally inspired book of the Bible," maintains that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was pride and inhospitality.

[21] As a member of The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), "a worldwide fellowship of Christian congregations serving all people and especially gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender communities," Meckley obviously supports a pro-gay position. However,

his interpretation relies on a reading strategy similar to his opponents. He simply quotes selected biblical passages, mentioning one verse to explain another. Like the anti-gay Web authors, Meckley bases his argument on a literal reading of the Bible.

[22] This common interpretive method, which is so typical for popular discourse on the Bible, appears also in many other pro-gay Web sites. An example is the Web site of "Whosoever: An Online Magazine For Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Christians" (<http://www.whosoever.org/>). Inspired by John 3:16, the home page describes the overall purpose of this magazine: "*Whosoever* strives to assure gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons that they are included when the Bible says 'whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.'" A quote from the Bible justifies the stance of the pro-gay online magazine.

[23] The page provides a link to biblical passages "used to condemn homosexuality" (<http://www.whosoever.org/bible/index.html>). The editor, Candace Chellew, explains the reason for this section:

Of the negative or critical e-mails I receive from critics of this magazine and its mission, I'd estimate 90% of them advise me to read my Bible. Specifically, I am urged to read at least one or all of the six passages we as GLBT Christians know as the "clobber passages." These are the verses, we're told, where God condemns homosexuality in no uncertain terms In this section of *Whosoever* we explore the six "clobber" passages and several other verses used as "prooftexts" of homosexuality's condemnation.

Genesis 18-19 is one of those passages (<http://www.whosoever.org/bible/genesis.htm>). Summarizing the content of the story, Chellew states that "it is unclear from these few verses whether God demolished the city because the citizens: 1. were uncharitable and abusive to strangers, 2. wanted to rape people, 3. engaged in homosexual acts." The interpreter then maintains that "the Church has traditionally accepted the third explanation" whereas "the first explanation is *clearly* the correct one" (emphasis added). To prove that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah did not consist in the inhabitants' sexual preference but in their inhospitality, Chellew lists other biblical texts mentioning Sodom and Gomorrah. She concludes: "We are faced with the inescapable and rather amusing conclusion that the condemned activities in Sodom had nothing to do with sodomy."

[24] By referring to biblical texts, Chellew maintains that the story condemns the inhospitality and idolatry of the inhabitants, not their homosexuality. Although the position defended is the opposite from the anti-gay Web pages, the methodology is similar. Chellew's final argument is a good example:

NOWHERE in the Scriptures does it say that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was homosexual sex. Even if the specific point of the story was concerning a sexual matter, rather than hospitality, the issue is rape not homosexuality. Jesus claimed the issue was simply one of showing hospitality to strangers (Luke 10:12). How ironic that those who discriminate against homosexuals seem to be true practitioners of the sin of Sodom.

Like many Web pages, this one also claims to reiterate the biblical text. Only this time Genesis 19 is not used as "a clobber passage." Joined with other biblical passages, Genesis 19 criticizes inhospitality. However, neither Chellew nor her opponents realize that they prooftext their position.

[25] A third example is a Web page that lists several Jewish sources to support a pro-gay stance. The site is particularly interesting because it includes extrabiblical texts. Published by the "Interfaith Working Group," the page is entitled "What was the sin of Sodom?" It offers a collection of classical Jewish texts related to Genesis 19 (<http://www.iwgonline.org/docs/sodom.html>). Robert Kaiser, the compiler and commentator of the site, explains that "classical Jewish texts concur that God did *not* destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because their inhabitants were homosexual. Not at all. Rather, the cities were destroyed because the inhabitants were nasty, depraved, and uncompromisingly greedy" (emphasis in the original). Kaiser then presents seven texts, adds a bibliography of more sources, and concludes: "So the next time someone tries to use Genesis 19 as an excuse to justify homophobia, we can educate them by giving them these sources to read and consider." The compiler is hopeful. He believes that more and more sources will convince his opponents to view Genesis 19 in a different way. Kaiser seems unaware that the participants in this debate share a similar methodological premise despite their opposing views. They quote biblical texts to support their preconceived views. Both sides, however, fail to address their common hermeneutical assumptions. They agree on two accounts. To them, the Bible is authoritative, and readers do not construct their interpretations.

[26] The examples illustrate that, in the digital world, Genesis 19 plays a central role for discussions on homosexuality. The Web pages also show the methodological similarity between opponents and proponents of homosexuality. The Internet is for them another communication avenue to air their positions and to gain power in the contemporary discussion on homosexuality. The Web pages also demonstrate that the digital debate is relatively polarized. Web pages are either for or against homosexuality. To prove one or the other view, interpreters rely on the same methodological approach to the Bible - they proof-text.

Proving Sodom and Gomorrah with Archaeology

[27] A significant number of Web pages presents archaeological findings to prove that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah existed and were destroyed as described in the biblical account. A home page, entitled "Welcome to the Mysteries of the Bible," is a good example of this recurrent interest (<http://www.biblemysteries.com/>). The author of the page, Michael S. Sanders, welcomes Web surfers with this invitation: "Every week participate in an exploration of another Bible Mystery." The site supposedly advances "scholarly rather than religious" views. The link "Previous Lectures" opens a long list of articles. Two are entitled "Sodom & Gomorrah" and "Sodom & Gomorrah - Part II."

[28] In the first lecture Sanders states that Bible scholars and archaeologists are uncertain about the precise location of Sodom and Gomorrah and three other cities mentioned in Genesis 14:3 (<http://www.biblemysteries.com/library/deadsea/>). However, he claims to settle the uncertainties with his lecture. Referring to scholarly research, Sanders identifies the location of the two cities. The work of two American archaeologists, Arabic names of five archaeological sites, and the archaeological site of *Bab edh-Dhra* prove that the discovered sites are not the original locations of the towns. Archaeologists found only the secondary towns that people built after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. The ruins of the original Sodom and Gomorrah are now flooded by the Dead Sea. This hypothesis enables Sanders to suggest an early date for Genesis 19. Openly dismissing scholarly hypotheses on the historical literary development of the biblical narrative, he regards the story as an eye-witness report.

The Biblical account could NOT have been made up by scribes after the Babylonian Exile. We will prove categorically that the work of Rast and Schaub absolutely confirms the Biblical account and that account must at least have been contemporary. How else could the "writer" know that an area which is the most barren surface of the earth could in ancient times have supported an enormous population when today nobody lives anywhere near there . . .

Sanders refers to Walter E. Rast and R. Thomas Schaub's work to argue for a literal reading of the biblical tale, although neither scholar supports this position. In other words, Sanders skews archaeological discoveries and biblical scholarship to prove that the biblical events happened as described in Genesis 19.

[29] His second lecture continues this effort (<http://www.biblemysteries.com/lectures/sodom2/>). Again, Sanders uses archaeological findings to justify the historical correctness of the biblical account. He rejects the dates of biblical scholarship and describes his view about the events, among "the major Mysteries of the Bible."

My revised chronology dates the Exodus to the end of the early Bronze Age and the final destruction of these sites coincides with the area-wide catastrophe which occurred at that time with the mass migrations and disruptions that followed. The vast cemeteries were therefore begun some 1,800 years earlier using conventional dating figures (much less using the conventional chronology) and were created as a result of the mass slaughter that took place at the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as recounted in the Bible.

In his effort to validate the biblical account Sanders subordinates the archaeological data to the biblical text like many early "biblical archaeologists." However, he argues for a biblical chronology that has little support from the scholarly community. In his view Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed in 1882 B.C.E. To give his argumentation scholarly weight, he includes satellite images from the area. In his opinion, they show that the excavated sites represent only the relocated cities further away from the Dead Sea (<http://www.biblemysteries.com/library/deadsea/>).

[30] As the description indicates, Sanders' presentation is problematic for several reasons. His work is driven primarily by religious conviction. With the help of archaeology, he hopes to demonstrate the reliability and the validity of a literal reading of Genesis 19. He calls himself a "biblical scholar," although he does not disclose his credentials. Despite his intention to present scholarly views, he is only superficially interested in scholarly work. He quotes his own words from one lecture to another, but he

does not engage scholarship. The origins of his sources are unclear, and some bibliographical references are outdated.<3>

[31] Another archaeological site openly admits its religious interests (<http://www.netlink.co.uk/users/cmc96/sodom.html>).<4> The title, "Sodom & Gomorrah: Read how these lost cities, now found, were revealed and why they were destroyed; Was Sodom and Gomorrah a preview of what is to come again soon?!" reflects a theme common to many fundamentalist Web pages. The page aims to prove that the two cities once existed and were later destroyed. The author uses references to Genesis 19 and archaeological findings, a quote from an assyriologist, and objections from "skeptics" to support this position. Moreover, he argues that "aerial or satellite pictures" and "balls of burnt sulphur" are "scientific proof that actual fire and brimstone rained down upon this area" (i.e. Sodom and Gomorrah).

[32] The author of the page also suggests that the story is a prediction of the near future. He states first that the archaeological findings provide the "physical evidence in these last days of man's rule . . . so that all mankind will have undeniable proof that what the Bible says is TRUE." Then he continues: "These discoveries indicate that the Second Coming of Christ could well be very soon." Archaeological findings enhance the fundamentalist Christian message of doom. The page concludes:

Exhaustive research has ascertained the following: These 5 [cities] - specified in the Bible - are the only known sites in the world covered by pellets of burnt sulphur. For pictures of Sodom and Gomorrah send for the video below!! It's on film.

Lacking a bibliography for the "exhaustive research," the Web page insists that archaeology proves the historical reliability of Sodom and Gomorrah. The page ends with an invitation to order a video entitled "Surprising Discoveries: Lost Cities by the Dead Sea; Exciting Discoveries Beneath the Dead Sea (Over 2 Hours of Compulsive Viewing)" as if the video offered visual evidence for the existence of Sodom and Gomorrah.

[33] Claiming the historical reliability of the biblical narrative, both sample Web pages use archaeology to give their interpretation scientific weight. However, their references to archaeological data are incomplete, outdated, and a mélange of scattered quotes and photos. Sometimes commercial interests take over. In one case the selling of a video ends the discussion about the historicity of Sodom and Gomorrah. This tendency towards commercialism becomes the openly acknowledged purpose of Web pages in the third category.

Commercial, Cultural, and Fantastic References

[34] Numerous Web pages try to catch the attention of Web surfers to buy an item on Sodom and Gomorrah. For instance, *filmnoir.com* sells a colorful poster of the movie "Sodom and Gomorrah" (1963) for \$65.00 (<http://www.filmnoir.com/sodom.htm>). The top line of the poster reads: "Inside their hearts no good existed . . . inside their cities no God!" Connotations about the immorality, societal chaos, and sexual corruption inspired the colors. They are all kept in somber tones of red, brown, and yellow.

[35] Also for sale are religious videos that want to prove the historicity of the biblical story. The Web page of "The Wellspring Collection" is an example of a conservative Christian company that uses the Internet for such commercial outreach. Entitled "Acts of Faith" (<http://www.wellmedia.com/collection/spirit/itb.html>), one of their videos features Genesis 19. The advertisement states that the film "introduces us to some of the Bible's first great heroes." The four heroes and their stories are "Noah and The Flood, Abraham and Sarah, Sodom and Gomorrah - Lot and His Wife, [and] Abraham and Isaac." The list indicates the special attention given to Sodom and Gomorrah. The names of the towns precede the hero, i.e. Lot. The 56-minute video costs \$14.95.

[36] Entitled "Sodom & Gomorrah: A Tail [*sic*] of Two Cities," another video exploits the sexual connotations of Genesis 19. The video sells for \$28.95 from a company that specializes in pornographic videos, books, and photos. The Web page explains that "not too often do we get Biblical stories adapted to porno scripts, and it's not hard to guess why. But here, it works, and again, it's not hard to guess why - the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is tailor-made for the blue screen" (<http://search.excaliburfilms.com/moviepgs/sodom.htm>). Videos like this one perpetuate the idea that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of the inhabitants' sexual corruption. The strategy is simple. The video makers rely on connotations of evilness and sexual depravity to seduce their audience to buy the film.<5>

[37] Songs and paintings also feature the biblical story. The Web page by "Scarlett Rose," a Montana-based religious music group, contains a song entitled "Sodom & Gomorrah" (<http://www.scarletrose.com/songs.html#s&g>):

you think you know me
you don't have a clue
well I've been listening
listening to you
you put me down
any way you can
I think you know just who I am

remember Lot!
they were at his door
he tried to leave but they wanted some
more
filled with lust
and evil desire
but what they got
was a pillar of fire

CHORUS

CHORUS
Sodom & gomorrah
look what's coming for ya!
Sodom & gomorrah
don't say I didn't warn ya!

you think you know it
you know the times
you look around
you don't see signs
I know you know it
you know it's true
but you don't know
what might happen to you

CHORUS

Only the chorus and the second strophe refer explicitly to Genesis 19. The chorus identifies the pronoun "you" with Sodom and Gomorrah and the pronoun "I" as the warning voice of God. The song appropriates the story as if it will happen again in the very near future. Scarlet Rose, the "I" voice of God, sings the song to warn "you," the listeners identified with Sodom and Gomorrah. "You" should remember what happened to Lot. Similarly, the group's homepage mentions that "Scarlet Rose is striving to be a one stop center for Christian sound recording . . . from concept [*sic*] to completion!" (<http://www.scarletrose.com/faq.html>).

[38] Another Web page illustrates the cultural and educational potential of the Internet. It presents the painting "The Destruction of Sodom" (<http://sunsite.unc.edu/cgfa/dore/p-dore11.htm>) by the book illustrator Gustave Dore who lived in France from 1833 to 1883. The author of the Web page, Carol L. Gerten, started the site "so that I could make fine art easily available over the Web, in hopes that others would enjoy it as much as I do." The site exemplifies that the Internet has indeed enormous potential to store cultural resources, including art on Genesis 19, and to make them accessible beyond museums.

[39] Trivial references to Genesis 19 appear in many Web pages. One page, no longer on-line, belonging to "Jon" featured photos of cats and dogs, one of which showed two cats named "Sodom and Gomorrah," while two other photos depicted each cat individually. Who would have thought to name a cat this way! Another page (<http://www.chank.com/fonts/sodom.html>) sells a font called "Sodom and Gomorrah." Yet another outlet for trivial references about Sodom and Gomorrah are jokes. The home page of "Reverend Fun" (<http://www.gospelcom.net/rev-fun/02-96/rf-02-96art.shtml>) provides a link to a cartoon in which one thin white male throws another thin white bespectacled male into the air. The text underneath the image reads: "Of all the sins that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah committed, casting lots was the worst" (see similar sites at <http://www.ladyhawk.com/jam27.html> and <http://www.jokepost.com/one.html>). Flattening the narrative to a simple and shallow joke, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah seems to lack any profound and serious meaning. It is as if the religious fervor that inspires so many other Web pages is completely absent here. Sodom and Gomorrah are no longer synonyms for evil. They have become harmless, vapid placeholders in silly jokes.

[40] Perhaps the most unexpected reference to Sodom and Gomorrah centers on UFOs. This page, entitled "UFology: Is Disclosure on the Horizon" (<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Shadowlands/6583/ufology.html>), discusses every conceivable topic related to contacts with aliens. The link "Extraterrestrials" (<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Shadowlands/6583/et.html>) opens a site called "Extraterrestrials: Ancient Cultures/ET Timeline" (<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Shadowlands/6583/et003.html>). Beginning with the year "310,000,000 B.C., the first evidence of man . . . in 'Ethiopia, Africa' and 'Tanzania'," the timeline

mentions Sodom and Gomorrah at the year "1900 B.C." A description states: "There is strong evidence that the Bible's ancient cities of 'Sodom and Gomorrah' next to the Dead Sea, were destroyed by a nuclear explosion. Sand vitrications found in Iraq next to the Dead Sea [*sic!*] resemble those produced by an atomic bomb. Notice it's called the Dead Sea! High salt content." The site sparkles with depictions of aliens, stars, and UFOs. Imaginatively incorporating names, themes, and events that include Genesis 19, the page does, however, not disclose the sources of information.

[41] Commercial, cultural, and fantastic references to Sodom and Gomorrah pull the biblical story into the trivia of contemporary life. At the same time the references show that digital culture is steeped in allusions to Genesis 19. Whenever the names of Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned, people respond. Their minds do not run blank, even if they do not know the Bible and they think of themselves as secular. The range of meanings for Sodom and Gomorrah is impressive. Evilness, sexual depravity, and even pet names are among the connotations. Sodom and Gomorrah continue to inspire the imagination of people.

Accounting for the Nexus of Bible and Culture

[42] The Internet is like a new "gold rush" or "Wild West" where fortunes are made and new stakes are claimed. People make lots of money by inventing new digital services and offering their goods online. Web pages on Sodom and Gomorrah are bountiful, fanciful, and imaginative; they all have an agenda. Some refer to the story to reject homosexuality, others to defend it. Several pages want to prove the historicity of the biblical account and use every old and new discovery to promulgate their convictions. Numerous Web sites mention Sodom and Gomorrah to enlarge their sales of pornographic items, to come up with a joke, or to present their account of the universe. In their eagerness to communicate and to make money, individuals and groups rush to let the world know how they approach Sodom and Gomorrah. The Internet gives them the opportunity to create and post Web pages on any subject of their whimsy. What can biblical scholars learn from this anarchic situation of the new "Wild West"?

[43] First, the Internet demonstrates that "culture" cannot and should not be ignored in biblical studies. Scholars have begun to study the Bible in culture as a formal topic only since the 1980s.<6> Reading *in front of* the biblical text, researchers have become interested to focus on readers and their contexts. The examination of references to Sodom and Gomorrah shares this growing interest to understand the connections between Bible and (digital) culture. The analysis guarantees that the many different approaches to the Bible are not lost, left unexamined, or unnoticed. The task becomes to trace biblical interpretations of past and present societies and to examine the values of these interpretations for reading the Bible today. This work has to include the Internet, one of the newest technological developments in which culture finds expression.<7>

[44] Second, the Web pages exemplify that biblical interpretations reflect societal conflicts. When biblical scholars examine cultural areas such as the Internet, the field has the opportunity to get involved in understanding society. The research then contributes to "unravel the network of social, political, and economic factors which regulate both the production and the reception of literature" - i.e. the Bible (Lefevere: 189). The Web pages on Sodom and Gomorrah illustrate this point. The growing gap between literal Bible readers and secular forces in Western societies finds digital expression in the two basic approaches to Genesis 19. On the one hand, Genesis 19 constitutes "authoritative evidence" for views for or against homosexuality and for the historical accuracy of the Bible. On the other hand, many trivial references to Sodom and Gomorrah indicate that the largely secular society does not take seriously the content or meaning of the Bible. Sodom and Gomorrah receive attention in shallow jokes or catchy titles. Although mediating positions exist in this polarized discussion, they appear rarely in the digital world and thus remain in the background. The Web pages demonstrate that the Bible represents both a contested and a marginalized area of discourse in contemporary society.

[45] If Web pages on Sodom and Gomorrah reflect social, political, and economic factors of society, how do professional readers of the Bible take them into account? Some might think that it is possible to interpret Genesis 19 regardless of such factors. Instead they might want to focus on the text itself or the history behind the biblical narrative. But much is to be gained from the integration of the digital world into biblical studies. As an expression of the world, the Internet provides a window to see how contemporary society treats the Bible and what the treatment discloses about society. In the case of Genesis 19 the digital world contributes to understanding the role and function of Sodom and Gomorrah in the context of contemporary struggles over sexuality, biblical authority, and secular indifference towards the Bible. These struggles are not new for scholars of the Bible but new for the analysis of the digital world. By taking this world into account, biblical scholars provide new evidence for the seriousness of these matters in contemporary Western culture.

[46] Third, the situation on the Internet concerning Genesis 19 demonstrates that biblical studies have to reach out to the wider academic and non-academic world. The analysis documents that scholarly discourse is strangely absent on the Web. This situation is certainly not limited to biblical studies. Many academics lament the dearth of academic sites. Others debate about the merits of posting lecture notes on the Web. In the meantime literal and trivial assessments flood the Internet where they remain unchallenged. Search engines do not list scholarly discussions on Genesis 19.<8> Are they not yet available, or do search engines not find them because they are deeply buried in the computer networks of universities? Several issues might be involved. The resistance of posting scholarly work on the Web could be related to copyright protection. Once scholarly ideas, lectures, or papers are available to the world at large, they can be accessed for free. Professors might resist to give away their intellectual work. They might also be concerned that free access to scholarly work could reduce the number of students who have to pay for the privilege of attending colleges and universities. It could also be that researchers in biblical studies do not yet know enough about computer technology to make full use of the Web. Whatever the reasons, the lack of scholarly information on Genesis 19 constitutes a problem for the representation of Sodom and Gomorrah in the digital world.

[47] The absence of biblical studies is also a problem for the reputation of the field. If biblical studies do not become visible and accessible to the general public, institutions of higher education might question the rationale for spending money on the field. Those in power at such institutions might come to believe that literal or trivial Bible readings are all there is to reading the Bible. The academic study of the Bible is often not known to them. Scholars from other disciplines might also start to think that biblical studies are disconnected from contemporary intellectual explorations. Therefore, the critical examination of the nexus of Bible and (digital) culture enhances the understanding of society and the appreciation for biblical studies. Sodom and Gomorrah are a case in point.

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