

Of Fathers and Daughters – Biblical Studies as a Multi-Faith, Pluralist, and Multi-Cultural Project

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The essay argues that biblical studies is a unique area for inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and enrichment. The biblical narratives provide sacred stories for at least three of the world religions. The paper explores Jewish, Christian and Islamic interpretations of the incident in Genesis 19 where Lot offers his daughters to the Sodomite mob and by comparing these interpretations highlights moral failings in the dominant Christian interpretive tradition. The essay argues that by recognising the biblical narratives as a multi-faith shared scripture, biblical studies can become grounded in principles of appreciation and respect for pluralism and diversity. These principles can be applied not only across traditions but also within traditions to ensure all voices have a chance to speak, especially those that might be silenced for not conforming to rigid orthodoxies including those based on gender, class, ethnicity, or sexuality.

In this essay I will explore the notion of biblical studies as a fundamental location for multi-faith dialogue. Central to my argument is the proposition that the biblical stories form an ecumenical scripture. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all stand on one version or another of these biblical stories, in the case of the latter two, the stories of the Christian New Testament as well as those of the Hebrew scriptures. Furthermore, the plurality of readings in time and space means that biblical studies comes equipped with a rich heritage, providing the possibility for entering into an enriching conversation that is both multi-faith and multi-cultural. No single group or person owns these stories and there is consequently no single meaning of a text. Any original meanings are lost over time with the changes in language and culture. The biblical world is a truly diverse and plural phenomenon. As a gay man who engages in biblical studies with an agenda of countering the use of biblical texts as ideological mainstays of Christian homophobia, I believe this fact is not only significant for my work but for the way in which biblical studies might be conducted. This essay will provide a multi-faith perspective on an incident in Genesis in order to challenge appropriations of the narrative for Christian homophobic ideological purposes. I will then conclude reflecting on the way this exercise demonstrates how a diverse, pluralistic and multi-faith biblical studies enterprise it must be truly inclusive of everyone who wishes to participate, especially those whose voices question the status quo.

The incident I will discuss is found in Genesis 19, and recounts how Lot, confronted by a violent mob of the men of Sodom demanding that he hand over

his guests to them, offers his daughters in place of his guests. This episode has caused no end of moral quandaries, particularly, but not only, within Christian traditions. I will present a variety of interpretations of Lot's behaviour from Christian, Jewish and Islamic perspectives. I will be arguing that by bringing together Christian readings of this incident, with Jewish and Islamic ones, the moral underpinning of Christian readings is exposed as fundamentally flawed. While none of the interpretations is immune from the misogyny that subordinates the wellbeing of daughters to that of male guests, Christian readings have been driven by a homophobic agenda aiming to conscript the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 as a warning spectacle of the retributive genocidal divine wrath incurred by the homoerotic. The Jewish and Islamic readings do not share this agenda and provide alternative perspectives.

Christian Quandaries

It is not my intention to outline the rise of the traditional Christian understanding of the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah that resulted in the destruction of the cities. Suffice to say that it is in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE that one sees the homophobic notion – that it was surrender to the homoerotic that led to the outpouring of divine wrath – come to predominate. Immediately a problem arises for Christians in reconciling the portrayal of Lot in Genesis 19. Why does Lot offer his daughters to the Sodomite mob and how should Christians evaluate the moral significance of Lot's behaviour? Part of the problem in framing answers to these questions is that Lot is portrayed quite positively in texts of the New Testament. In Luke 17: 26-32, the text contrasts both Lot and Lot's wife as models of belief and doubt:

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them --it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife.

Lot represents appropriate preparedness while Lot's wife represents those who do not respond correctly. This contrasting use of the pair will become a feature of much subsequent Christian polemic, in particular, in the texts of Christian monasticism. Lot and the Sodomites are similarly contrasted in 2 Peter 2:4-10. Rather than expand on Sodom's fate, the text is more concerned to hold up Lot as an example of a righteous person who patiently endured the crimes of his neighbours until delivered by the deity. The Sodomites are said to be "lawless" and engaging in "licentiousness" (2:7). The text also stresses that the fate of Sodom and of the angels is an example of what awaits all of the ungodly especially those who despise authority and give themselves over to "depraved lust"

(2:9-10). But nowhere in 2 Peter 2 is any specific sexual offence singled out and associated with the Sodomites. How a person would understand 2 Peter 2:4-10 depends on what that person understands the evil of the Sodomites to be. Of equal importance is the fact that these New Testament passages do not refer to Lot offering his daughters to the mob.

The Christian problem then in building the homophobic interpretation of Genesis 19 is what to do with Lot. If Sodom is the paradigm of the society overrun by the homoerotic and Lot is the model for Christians what does one do about his offering of his daughters? Augustine is a very good example of the problems Christians face. For Augustine, Sodom is associated with the homoerotic chaos of uncontrolled desire. However, he does not mandate celibacy for all but sees in marriage an arena where sexual desire can be appropriately employed. As Brown points out, for Augustine, what gives legitimacy to such usage is the requirement to reproduce and hence such procreative employment of desire is a natural usage and thus legitimate (Brown, 1988: 400-401). The homoeroticism of Sodom is thoroughly unnatural and, hence, is illegitimate, giving rise to the genocidal divine intervention. This dichotomy of natural and unnatural concretises a fundamental moral flaw underpinning the Christian homophobic reading of Genesis 19. If the point of the story is, as such readings allege, that there is no greater sexual evil than sex between men, then is such male homoeroticism more abominable than the rape of women? Is it even legitimate to offer women to be raped if it will prevent such sexual expression? Contributing to the problem is the Christian tradition of reading Lot as a positive model.

Augustine confronts this moral dilemma in the 9th chapter of *Against Lying* and is one of the few Christians to engage consciously with the dilemma posed here. While he attempts various justifications for Lot's behaviour, Augustine appears to realise that they are all morally untenable. However, he leaves the matter unresolved rather than critique the fundamental assumptions on which it is based. Augustine's argument relies on the question of compensatory or justifiable sin - is it right to commit a lesser sin to forestall a greater one? The focus of the discussion is the siege of Lot's house and his offer of his daughters to the mob. Augustine commences his argument by asking if anyone doubts that it is sinful "for a father to prostitute his daughters to the fornication of the impious" (*Against Lying* 9: 20). Yet, Augustine points out, this was exactly the situation of Lot in Sodom. Surely the intent of the Sodomites towards Lot's guests is something that would merit doing whatever could be done to avert it. Lot was undoubtedly a just man and justice recognises that it is "less evil for women to suffer violation than men" (*Against Lying* 9: 20). Augustine finally rejects that argument, saying if that notion were accepted Satan could tempt people into sin by threatening them with a greater sin.

Augustine then raises the question of consent to sin. He argues that even if the Sodomites had violated the angels; as no consent was involved, the angels would not be spiritually defiled. The focus on consent at this point of his argument is striking. It indicates that Augustine seems to have an understanding of the importance of a person's consent in determining an ethical evaluation of

these events. His argument almost enables a reading that recognises rape in a way that no other text has done. He says:

But, do not let your fears compel you to do that which, if done to your daughters with their consent, will make you a pander to their profligacy with the Sodomites, and, if done without their consent, will make you a betrayer of their innocence to the Sodomites (*Against Lying* 9: 22).

However, while Augustine has some sense of the importance of consent in these events it seems beyond his capacity to initiate or articulate a Christian moral theology of rape. But, then, Augustine's main focus is on the men, in particular, Lot. Does Lot provide a model worthy of emulation in this instance? He concludes that Lot cannot here be regarded as a model for Christians. Through the confusion and panic of the moment, Lot has been made to fall into sin.

Nevertheless, Augustine considers another possible defense of Lot on the grounds that it is better to suffer a wrong than inflict it. Lot's guests were the potential victims of a wrong. Augustine argues that maybe "the just man... preferred his daughters to suffer the wrong instead of his guests in view of his authority over his daughters" (*Against Lying* 9: 22). Once again the question of consent takes on a central importance in Augustine's argument. He points out that Lot cannot offer himself because in doing so he would then give consent to having sex with the Sodomites. By offering his daughters instead,

the women... did not offer themselves to be defiled... lest the consent of their own will, not submission to someone else's lust, make them guilty... Against his daughters, moreover, who were free from sin he did not sin either, for he did not make them sin, if they were subdued against their will, but merely put up with sinners (*Against Lying* 9: 22).

However, this argument raises the whole question of power and authority. In a revealing analogy, Augustine then raises the question of whether a master sins by offering a slave to be killed so as to protect the guests of his house. Augustine refuses to pursue the answer to this question in detail but concludes, "we should not make part of our manners everything that we read has been done by righteous or just men" (*Against Lying* 9: 22).

I am both fascinated and frustrated by Augustine's arguments. Frustrated because as I noted above, the importance of consent in considering the ethics of these events could have opened up an important moral discourse on rape in Christianity. However, Augustine's homophobia and erotophobia ultimately preclude that possibility. What is fascinating is that Augustine's arguments reveal the misogyny that is a fundamental basis of homophobia and which, together with homophobia, is a crucial element of the sexual violence being threatened in the Genesis narrative. Sexual penetration of men, regardless of consent, takes away their masculinity and degrades them in status to that of women. Despite Augustine's clear perception that there is something very wrong in what Lot does, his own homosexual panic renders him ultimately complicit in the sins of the father against the daughters and thus complicit in the sexual power politics of the Sodomites' own behaviour.

The subsequent tradition, with the exception of John Calvin, either follows Augustine or tends towards complete exoneration of Lot. Thus the medieval exegete, Nicholas of Lyra, revisits Augustine's arguments in his own commentary on the narrative. He begins with the point that Lot acts to avoid a "greater evil" namely "the sin against nature and violence against his guests" (Nicholas of Lyra. *PSTB* Gen 19:8 note n). He then asks whether Lot sins when he offers his daughters to the mob. It could be argued that Lot does not sin, because of two evils the lesser is to be preferred. Clearly the sin against nature is a greater evil than the defloration of virgins (Nicholas of Lyra. *PSTB* Gen 19:8 note n). Specifically citing *Against Lying*, Lyra summarises Augustine's arguments and concludes that "Lot could not offer his daughters in such a way without consenting to something that was a sin in its very nature, not only a venial one, such as an obliging lie, but indeed a mortal one" (Nicholas of Lyra. *PSTB* Gen 19:8 note n). But he continues, "And yet he was exonerated to some extent, even if not completely, partly by reason of the disturbed mental state he was in, partly to ward off the most foul vice in his co-citizens and the violence against his guests" (Nicholas of Lyra. *PSTB* Gen 19:8 note n). So Lot is partially exonerated due to the derangement he experienced by his confrontation with the spectre of the sin against nature. A major problem with Lyra's argument is that he shows no real understanding of the enormity of rape. The sin against nature is far worse than the defloration of virgins, and it is understandable to Lyra that someone would attempt such a strategy to forestall the former evil, even if they might sin in doing so.

Martin Luther disagrees with both Augustine and Nicholas of Lyra to exonerate Lot completely. Lot is the godly exemplar in contrast to the frenzied Sodomites whose lust has led them into "incurable madness" and "utterly incurable sin" (Luther, 1955-: 3: 256). Luther recognises that Lot's offer itself is "a great disgrace" (Luther, 1955-: 3: 257). Luther gives a brief outline of the arguments of Augustine and Lyra and then informs his audience that both found that Lot sinned in making this offer. Luther disagrees with both and, without any supporting arguments, simply declares:

I excuse Lot and think that he adopted this plan without sinning. He did not plan to expose his daughters to danger, for he knew that they were not desired by the frenzied men; but he hoped that this would be a way to soften their wrath. Therefore this speech should be regarded as hyperbole (Luther, 1955-: 3: 259).

By offering his daughters Lot is attempting to shock the Sodomites out of their frenzy, a frenzy that comes from their surrender to the unnatural passions of same sex desire.

An even more extreme form of exoneration is found in the fourteenth century Middle English poem, *Cleanness*, which celebrates heterosexual eros as a gift of the deity for the enjoyment of life and therefore highly valued by the deity. The contravention of this divine eros by same-sex desire is an assault on and an affront to the deity. While, in the biblical narrative, Lot is an ambiguous character, there is no such ambiguity in the poem. Lot is a "good man" and he is struck by "bitter

shame" at the Sodomites' demand (*Cleanness*: 849-850). Lot is heroic and rushes bravely to confront the crowd. As Keiser notes, Lot "combines courage and romantic graciousness" and faces the Sodomites "reasonably, balancing horror and inner turmoil with outward equanimity" as he appeals "to a standard of courtly heterosexual decorum" (Keiser, 1997: 154, 155).

When Lot confronts the raging mob of Sodomites, this scion of courtly heterosexual decorum becomes nothing more than a pimp and a pander and the patriarchal, misogynistic underpinnings of this divinely ordained courtly heterosexual eros are revealed. The poet presents Lot as offering his daughters to the mob with the intent almost to cure the Sodomites of same-sex desire and convert them to heterosexuality:

But I shall teach you a better device in accordance
with nature. I have a treasure in my house, my two
lovely daughters, who are virgins up to now, unspoiled
by any men. Though I say it myself, there are no
ladies more beautiful in Sodom.
They are fully grown, ripe and ready for men; it is
a better pleasure to join naturally with them. I
shall hand these two lively attractive girls over
to you, and you can play with them as you like, and
leave my guests alone (*Cleanness*: 865-872).

The *Cleanness* poet has made Lot a promoter of heterosexuality framed in a discourse of the natural. The poet's Lot suffers no qualms about what he does and goes out of his way to extol the sexually desirable qualities of his daughters and the pleasure they will bring to the mob. In this account, the daughters are offered as a means of heterosexual pedagogy.

Calvin, alone, does not attempt to exonerate Lot. By offering his daughters to the mob, Lot shows that, despite his faith, he has not developed an appropriate spirit of trust but allows his mind to be "carried hither and thither by hastily catching at wicked counsels" (Calvin, 1984: I: 497). Calvin recognises that others have extenuated his action - he can even excuse them for doing so - however he condemns Lot's actions in no uncertain terms:

But he should rather have endured a thousand deaths, than have resorted to such a measure. Yet such are commonly the works of holy men; since nothing proceeds from them so excellent, as not to be in some respect defective. Lot, indeed, is urged by extreme necessity; and it is no wonder that he offers his daughters to be polluted, when he sees that he has to deal with wild beasts; yet he inconsiderately seeks to remedy one evil by means of another... I have no doubt that, being willing to avail himself of the first subterfuge which occurred to him, he turned aside from the right way (Calvin, 1984: I: 497).

While Lot was brave and committed to the virtue of hospitality in going out to face the mob, he falls down by not trusting sufficiently in the deity. The condemnation of Lot's behaviour suits Calvin's broader theo-political purpose.

Lot's failure before the mob demonstrates the power of the ungodly society to weaken and corrupt the faithful, thus reinforcing the imperative for believers to either separate themselves from such a wicked order or to suppress it. A godly society is a school for godly living as is the reverse.

Offered Daughters in Judaism

In contrast to Christian traditions, Lot is held in very low regard in Judaism. By his separation from Abraham to live in Sodom, Lot is understood as saying, "I want no part of Abraham or of his God" (Genesis Rabbah 41:7:4). Lot comes to represent a type of converso or apostate Jew. Similarly Judaism has a different understanding of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Not sexual sin but sins of cruelty, injustice and abuse of the poor and outsider, are the Jewish understanding of why the cities were destroyed. Indeed, a 20th century Orthodox Jewish text states that Sodom and Gomorrah enacted the first anti-immigration laws (Scherman in Genesis Comm. Digest: 595). Curiously many early rabbinic texts, such as Genesis Rabbah and the Targumim, simply note the incident of Lot's offering his daughters without comment. One, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, clearly endorses Lot's offer. Comparing him to Moses, the text states: "Just as Moses gave his life for the people, so Lot gave up his two daughters instead of the two angels..." (PRE XXV: 85). But the *Pirke* stands alone in clearly endorsing Lot.

If silence is consent, does the lack of comment on this incident in other earlier rabbinic texts mean that no problem is seen with Lot's behaviour and is thus endorsed? An alternative perspective could be based on the complete excision of the incident from later texts such as the Zohar and the *Sefer ha-Yashar*, each being otherwise an extensive retelling of the biblical narratives. This alternative perspective would understand the offer by Lot as an unpleasantness best ignored. But a problem, then, would be the fact that, apart from the *Pirke*, all of the texts hold Lot in fairly low regard. Such an outrageous action would be yet more proof of Lot's perfidy. Perhaps, such an act speaks for itself and needs no further commentary. It is, of course, a typically Sodomite thing to do. This perspective is what one finds in the brief reference to the incident in the *Tanna debe Eliyahu* (*Tanna debe Eliyahu*, ER 158). Lot offers his daughters to the mob, behaviour in keeping with the ways (*devarim she-hen be-derekh erez*) of Sodom. By so describing Lot's offer, the text clearly registers strong disapproval. The only mitigating factor in the whole incident might be that Lot is interceding on behalf of his guests, something which is the complete opposite to the normal ways (*devarim she-einan be-derekh erez*) of Sodom. But the offering of his daughters is considered typical Sodomite behaviour.¹

Amongst the individual rabbinic commentators of the medieval and later eras, the negative understanding of Lot's character prevails, with the exception of Nahmanides (Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman - Ramban). However, while being the most sympathetic to Lot as a character, Ramban condemns Lot's offer of his daughters to the mob in no uncertain terms. For Ramban, this action represents Lot's disgrace showing that he has "an evil heart." The offer reveals that Lot

is ready to appease the men of the city by abandoning his daughters to prostitution... it shows that the prostitution of women was not repugnant to him, and that in his opinion he would not be doing such great injustice to his daughters (Nahmanides, 1971: 251).

He reinforces his condemnation by quoting Tanchuma Vayeira 12, which states that a man should fight to the death to protect his wife and daughters. What is surprising is that some later rabbis, while still viewing Lot negatively, attempt explanations of his offering his daughters that treat Lot's intention more 'generously' than Ramban does. Also noteworthy is that in none of these explanations is there any comparison between the supposed 'naturalness' of the rape of women vis-à-vis the 'unnaturalness' of male rape. Abravanel argues that Lot's offer was insincere and meant to gain time so that his guests would be able to flee (Genesis Comm. Digest, 684). Sforno also suggests that Lot was attempting a ruse. Lot made the offer, certain that the men betrothed to his daughters would rise up to defend them from the crowd. The ensuing uproar, Lot hoped, would deter the mob from their original purpose (Sforno, 1987: 91). Arama argues that Lot was attempting to deflect the mob's anger from his guests to himself. Lot wanted the mob to recognise that he was the one who had breached the city's laws by offering shelter to the angels and that the angels, his guests, were not aware of the import of his action. Therefore Lot "offered his daughters as expiation for his own disloyal conduct, not as substitute for the strangers" (Arama, 1986: 150). However, Arama does not say in what way Lot's daughters were meant to expiate his conduct, i.e. was he handing them over to be raped, to be punished in his place or as hostages?

Lot's daughters offered as hostages in Islamic commentary

To the best of my knowledge, Arama's argument stands alone in Jewish and Christian traditions, however, it is echoed in the Islamic world. There is no single account of the Sodom story in the Qur'an, instead, there are many references to different elements of the story. Furthermore, in Islam, Lot is viewed as a prophet of God, not as great as Abraham or Moses, perhaps, but a worthy prophet nonetheless. Indeed, in the Qur'an, parallels are drawn between Lot's struggles in Sodom and the Prophet Mohammed's own struggles with the disbelievers in Mecca. The siege of Lot's house, by the Sodomites, and the offering of his daughters to them, is recounted in two Suras of the Qur'an. The account in Sura 11 resembles somewhat the biblical account:

And when Our messengers came to Lot, he grew anxious about them, for he was powerless to offer them protection. 'This is indeed a day of woe,' he said. His people, long addicted to evil practices, came running towards him. 'My people,' he said, 'here are my daughters; surely they are more wholesome to you. Fear God, and do not humiliate me by insulting my guests. Is there not one good man among you?' They replied: 'You know we have no need of your daughters. You know full well what we are seeking.' (Sura 11:77-79).²

In this Sura, it is quite easy to read a sexual interest on the part of the mob and it certainly appears that Lot is offering his daughters because their rape is somehow "more wholesome" than that of his male/angelic guests. However, the second account in Sura 15 is more ambiguous:

Such were the instructions We gave him; for the wrongdoers were to be utterly destroyed next morning. The townsfolk came to him rejoicing. He said: 'These are my guests; do not disgrace me. Have fear of God and do not shame me.' They replied: 'Did we not forbid you to entertain strangers?' He said: 'Here are my daughters: take them, if you are bent on evil.' By your life, they were blundering in madness! At sunset the Cry overtook them. We laid their town in ruin and let loose a shower of clay-stones upon them (Sura 15:67-74).

This account explicitly puts the issue of Lot's hospitality in the foreground - he has been forbidden to receive strangers. In which case the Sodomites' assault on Lot's house need not be sexually motivated but rather have the intention of punishing Lot or arresting his guests. If that be the case then what would Lot's offer of his daughters mean? Two commentators on the Qur'an, from the Ahmaddiya Islam tradition, argue that Lot is offering his daughters as hostages to guarantee the good faith of his guests.

Muhammad Ali (1951) finds the suggestion that a prophet like Lot would offer his daughters up for rape to be untenable. In his commentary on Sura 11, he describes Lot as an outsider in Sodom and thus forbidden to house or to entertain strangers. Lot offers his own daughters but as hostages so as to "keep his guests with him" (Muhammad Ali, 1951:453). He further develops his argument when explicating Sura 15:67-74. For him, verse 15:70 which he understands as forbidding Lot to keep guests, confirms that Lot was "a stranger among the Sodomites" and "forbidden by the people to entertain any stranger as a guest or to give him shelter" (Muhammad Ali, 1951: 515). He repeats here his explanation that Lot offers his daughters as hostages to be a surety for his guests' intentions and behaviour (Muhammad Ali, 1951: 515).

Mahmood Ahmad (1988) develops this theme and argues strongly against any sexual intent on the part of the Sodomites. He does so to protect the character of Lot, a prophet sent by the deity. Ahmad describes the Sodomites as having "adopted the calling of the road" and, thus, "used to plunder wayfarers" being "practically in a state of war with their neighbours" (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1103). As they are apprehensive of reprisals and because of the resulting security fears, they have forbidden strangers to stay among them. But "Lot, like all Prophets of God... naturally used to look after the comfort of strangers and entertain them" (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1104). The Sodomites had constantly warned Lot against this practice and, on this occasion, were resolved to punish him for his defiance. Ahmad refutes other commentators' attribution of sexual intent on the part of the Sodomites because "they (the Sodomites) should have rejoiced at the sight of strangers and not been displeased at seeing them" (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1104). In his commentary on Sura 15:68-71 he stresses that the Sodomites had long sought an excuse to expel Lot and they came rejoicing (15:68) and his entertaining of the

strangers now gave them a valid excuse to banish him from Sodom (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1301).

For Ahmad, Lot's apparent offer of his daughters is to remind the Sodomites that if they really entertained the fear that he (Lot) might do them harm in league with the strangers, they had his daughters in their custody and they could wreak vengeance on him by punishing them. That was a better and purer course for them to adopt, for in that way they would also avoid the disgraceful act of insulting the guests (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1104). However, Ahmad points out, only males can be accepted as hostages, which is why the Sodomites reject Lot's offer of his daughters. They also want to prevent strangers coming to Sodom and so they will not be happy with hostages if it means the strangers remain at liberty within the city (Ahmad 1988: 3:1105). Ahmad, however, accepts the proposition put by other Qur'anic commentators that a prophet is "the father of his people" and "can speak of their women as his daughters" (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1105). Consequently, if the Sodomites are intending rape, then Lot is commending the Sodomites to their wives "rather than satisfy their lust unnaturally" with his guests (Ahmad, 1988: 3:1105). But Ahmad dismisses as absurd any proposition that Lot would offer his two daughters to the mob in lieu of the angels.

The Sunni commentator Yusuf Ali advances an argument similar to Ahmad's alternative proposition that Lot is commending the men to their wives. In his commentary on Sura 11:77-83, it is clear that he reads the Sodomites' intentions towards the angels to be sexual - they are a "rabble inflamed with evil passions" (1938: 536). Elsewhere he declares that the Sodomites besieged Lot's house because being "addicted to unnatural crime... the news of the advent of handsome young men inflamed them" (1938: 649). Discussing the offer of Lot's daughters, Yusuf Ali points out that some commentators suggest that the reference to 'my daughters' "in the mouth of a venerable man like Lot, the father of his people, may mean any young girls of the towns" (1938: 535). As proof, he cites the fact that the term 'my son' is "still a common mode of address in Arabic speaking countries when an elderly man addresses a young man" (1938: 535). His translation of Sura 15:61-77 makes explicit what he means by Lot commending these "young girls of the towns" to the Sodomite men. Yusuf Ali renders verse 71 as "There are my daughters (to marry) if you must act (so)" (1938: 649), thus portraying Lot as offering women for marriage rather than for immediate pack rape. Yusuf Ali further notes that the reference to daughters "in the mouth of a venerable man may mean young girls of the City, which would be appropriate considering the large number of men who came to besiege Lot's house" (1938: 649). However, like the two Ahmaddiya commentators, Yusuf Ali does not accept the proposition that Lot would offer his own two daughters, or any other women, up for rape.

Conclusion

In Christianity the reading of Genesis 19 as a cautionary tale of divine vengeance on the homoerotic gave rise to further morally dubious understandings of Lot's offering his daughters to the Sodomites. In part it arose from a Christian valorisation of Lot set down in Christian scriptures but also served the agenda of

further abjecting the homoerotic. It could be argued that the objective of degrading the homoerotic required the figure of the perturbed, distressed or pedagogic father offering his daughters up for pack rape. Thus homophobia was joined with misogyny in the reading and application of the text. These failings are highlighted when Christian readings are compared to Jewish ones. Jewish tradition reads the story as a cautionary tale of injustice and abuse of outsiders. Furthermore Jewish tradition is not interested in redeeming Lot, who is seen as a type of converso and apostate Jew. Consequently, with some exceptions, Lot's offer of his daughters is condemned as a sign that Lot has too readily assimilated the mores of Sodom.³ However, the moral failure of the Christian reading is brought into even stronger focus when compared to Islamic readings. Islamic tradition shares the Christian valorisation of Lot, who is portrayed in the Qur'an as a prophet of God. Islam also allows for both Christian and Jewish understandings of the sin of Sodom. Nevertheless, it is considered to be totally absurd that a prophet would hand over his own daughters to be raped and highly disreputable to suggest such a possibility. While the Islamic explanations of Lot's behaviour are not without problems they are definitely preferable to the Christian ones. My own position, however, would most strongly accord with the Jewish reading of the story.

By bringing together interpretations of a disturbing biblical incident from across the three Abrahamic religions, I have brought them into conversation with each other and have both relativised and exposed the moral shortcomings of a dominant Christian reading tradition. I do not do so to posit a superiority of one faith over another. On the contrary, I come from a particular Christian background and am wanting to address an injustice in my own tradition grounded in a dominant way of reading a passage of scripture. I have started from the recognition that this scripture is not a Christian preserve but is a shared scripture. Consequently I have endeavored to find out how those from other traditions read and understand this passage/event. My exploration of Jewish traditions has not only enabled me to question these flawed dominant readings in Christianity but I believe it has enriched me both personally and in my biblical work. Furthermore, my forays into Islam have alerted me to a rich interpretive world still to be explored and which will prove similarly enriching. Two hallmarks, therefore, of applying a multi-faith and pluralist perspective to biblical studies are thus demonstrated - to treat the other with respect and to be open to what might be learned in the encounter with that other.

Pluralism and openness are further highlighted in this essay in two ways. Firstly two of the three Islamic commentators under discussion come from Ahmaddiya Islam, a movement regarded in orthodox Islam as heretical if not apostate. Secondly I speak as a gay man with an agenda of countering and undermining, if not ending, Christian homophobia. For biblical studies to be a truly multi-faith, multi-cultural and pluralist enterprise it must be truly inclusive of everyone who wishes to participate and there must be no attempt to exclude those whose voices question the status quo. There is no hierarchy or orthodoxy that can claim a monopoly of ownership of these biblical narratives. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are not singularities but multiplicities and other religious

traditions such as the Baha'i and ancient Gnostics also have a relationship to these texts. In Western biblical studies, too, there has been the collapse of the historical critical approach and the proliferation of a wide variety of biblical hermeneutics, including reader-oriented, literary, psycho-analytical, deconstructionist, cultural studies, post-colonial, materialist, Marxist and other approaches. As a result of this proliferating variety of hermeneutical approaches, Biblical studies is even becoming a secular enterprise open to non-believer and believer alike. There are two sites, in particular, that demonstrate this reality and where, I would argue, biblical studies is providing a rich field of multi-faith dialogue. One is in feminist women-oriented biblical interpretation. Here, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, post-Christian women (and men) from Asia, Africa, Australasia, Europe and the Americas engage with biblical texts from the perspective of countering sexism, misogyny and patriarchal social and religious power structures. Similarly there is the growing area of translesbigay Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox spirituality, theology and biblical interpretation. Most recently, too, Islamic voices have been joining these discussions. I look forward, one day, to reading an Iranian or Iraqi or even an Australian lesbian Shiite interpretation of Genesis.

Endnotes

¹. Braude and Kapstein mistranslated the passage rendering it:

Thus when Lot offered them natural sexual intercourse with his own daughters [in order to divert them from unnatural intercourse with his male visitors] they said, *Stand back* (Gen 19:9); but when he argued with them against such unnatural intercourse with his visitors, they mocked him saying, *This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs play the judge* (Gen 19:9). (*Tanna debe Eliyahu*: ER 158)

The term that Braude and Kapstein mistranslated as natural/unnatural with a sexual meaning is *derekh erez* or the "way of the land/earth." Birnbaum points out that this term is used to signify "local custom, good behaviour, courtesy, politeness, etiquette" (Birnbaum, 1979:147). According to Ulrich Berzbach, *derekh erez* is a major structuring principle and underlying theme of this substantial section of the *Tanna debe Eliyahu* (for a detailed argument of this position see Berzbach, 1999). What might have misled Braude and Kapstein is the fact that the negative form of *derekh erez* can also have the meaning of unusual, irregular or not the standard way. Consequently its negative form is used in shorthand way in rabbinic texts to denote anal sex, generally in cases between a man and a woman, husband and wife. In other words, anal sex is not a standard or regular or customary use of the anus. However, the issue in this passage is not about anal sex, whether inside or outside of marriage, but the customs/mores of the land (*derekh erez*) of Sodom.

². All Qur'anic citations are from the Dawood translation (1994).

³. Ironically, perhaps Christians and Jews both agree on seeing Lot as a model Christian.

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