

Breaking Open: Sodom and Gomorrah

Soulforce



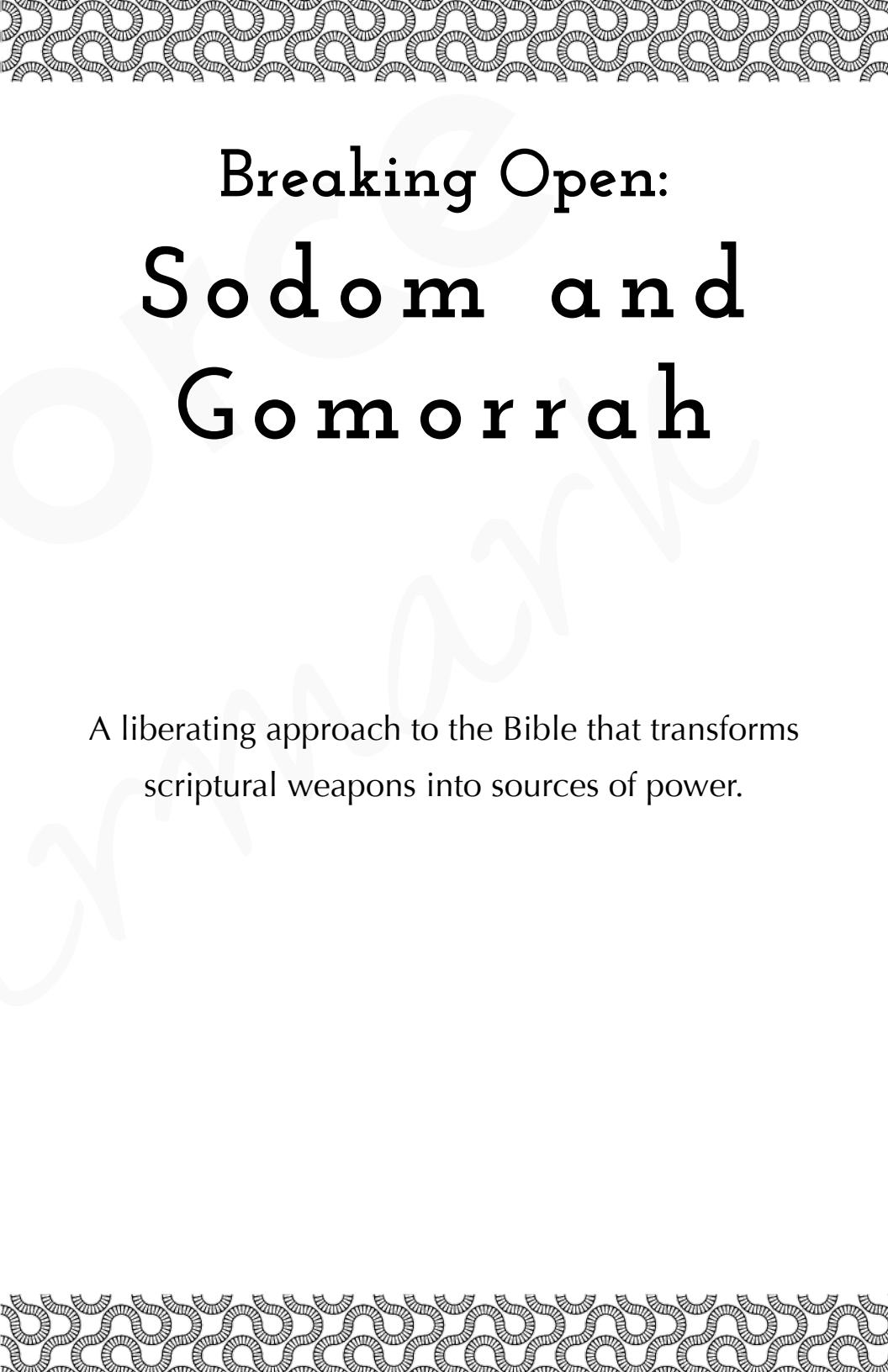
Soulforce provides expertise on Christian Supremacy to further the movement toward collective liberation. We work to end the political and religious oppression of transgender, intersex, queer, bisexual, lesbian, and gay people through relentless, nonviolent resistance.

Learn more about our social justice organizing at www.Soulforce.org.

The Breaking Open Series not only provides guidance on the challenging scriptural conversations that are used to harm our people but also support you in building a just and life-giving theological framework that is based in principles of liberation and solidarity in order to be ready for any conversation.

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With thanks to our Advisory Council who accompany this project:
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Breaking Open: Sodom and Gomorrah

A liberating approach to the Bible that transforms
scriptural weapons into sources of power.



Introduction.

As part of our Reclaiming Spirit work, Soulforce has developed this series, “Breaking Open,” to combat scripture-based oppression alongside a set of workshops on Christian Supremacy, Intersectional Justice, and Healing from Spiritual Trauma to decode the language of fundamentalism and connect the dots between Christian Supremacy and systemic injustices like racism, homophobia, and classism.

This booklet goes deep into one of the “clobber passages” in the Bible, which are so named because they are the ammunition most often used to harm LGBTQI people through spiritual violence.

The story of Sodom & Gomorrah is weaponized against our people all across the Abrahamic traditions, making this resource applicable to multiple contexts. For this series, we specifically root ourselves in the Christian tradition, because Christianity is the language of power that we encounter most often and study most closely.

For those of us who have been injured by Bible-based condemnation, LGBTQI people of Abrahamic faiths, or for those who come from these traditions, this can be scary work. For others, it can be confusing and frustrating to understand insider logic and language. Regardless of where you are or where you come from, it is our deepest hope that this resource will give you courage to thoughtfully engage the text for yourself and help you to find your own authentic voice in the debate over LGBTQI people’s lives.

At the very least, biblical literacy offers you and your Christian conversation partners--be they at home, at church, in your community, or across the globe--a common language and a starting point to engage deeply and collaborate on solving very real problems, even if your theologies don't completely match. This hard work of addressing spiritual violence transforms hearts and minds, including our own.

Are you ready?

Many blessings on the journey,

Rev. Alba Onofrio

Rev. Alba Onofrio
Spiritual Strategist for Soulforce

P.S. One more thing -- if you are reading this resource because you hope to become more confident that God loves you in your queer identity or your trans* identity, let me tell you now: God absolutely loves you as you are right now and celebrates your coming into your most authentic self... and there are plenty of Bible verses to back that up!



A Prayer in Preparation.

Beloved Creator, Giver of Life, Source of Love:

We come before You with open minds and humble hearts.
We have been told many things about the Bible.
We have witnessed this sacred word used to heal and save.
We have seen it used to damn and condemn.

Please guide the words of this resource along with the minds
and hearts of those who read it, so that we may better
understand our call as people of faith in a suffering world.

Show us the path that leads to You.

Teach us the ways of Truth, Oh Love, and set our hearts
aflame, once again, to dedicate ourselves anew to a moral
compass that points to wholeness and life abundant.

In the precious names we have each come to call You,

Amen.



In Focus: Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 18:16-19.29

3

The Accusation.

God destroyed Sodom & Gomorrah because they were full of bad people, specifically homosexuals. Therefore God hates homosexuality. God will destroy all homosexuals and the nations that harbor them. AIDS is often framed as a punishment for the immorality of homosexuality. And LGBTQI folks are threatened with Hell if we do not repent from our homosexual desires/behaviors, renounce our queerness, and become good heterosexuals.

"Sodomy laws" that most often target gay men and trans* women with the possibility of severe punishment are based in the same wrong interpretation of this Bible story.



The Heart of the Matter.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is the go-to Bible story to prove that “God hates gays,” but it is also one of the clearest examples of mistaken identity in the Bible. Words like “sodomy” (pejorative term referring to anal sex) and “sodomite” (pejorative term for gay man, literally someone guilty of sodomy) are clear examples of how pervasive this lie has become. “Sodomy laws” that most often target gay men and trans* women with the possibility of severe punishment are based in the same wrong interpretation of this Bible story.



Summary.

The passage begins in with a discussion between God and Abraham about the wickedness of Sodom. Abraham asks God if the city will be destroyed, killing the righteous along with the wicked. They discuss it, and Abraham negotiates with God to save the city. God agrees that if there are even ten righteous people in Sodom, the city will be saved. God sends two angels disguised as men to Sodom. There they meet Abraham's nephew, Lot, who invites them to his home to eat and rest for the night as is the cultural expectation for the Hebrew people of the time.

Later all the men of the city surround Lot's house and demand the two foreigners be sent out so they can rape them.

Lot refuses and instead offers the angry mob his two virgin daughters to rape. The angels pull Lot back into the house and mob gets struck blind so they cannot get in.

The next morning the angels get Lot's family out of Sodom just before God extinguishes it, and they tell them not to stop or look back or else they will be consumed like everything else in sight. They flee to a nearby town, Zoar. But Lot's wife looks back at the city and she becomes a pillar of salt.

“ The Text. ”

Genesis 18:16 Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. 17 The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? [d] 19 No, for I have chosen[e] him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” 20 Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! 21 I must go down and see

whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. [f] 23 Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” 26 And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty

righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." 27 Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29 Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 30 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." 31 He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 32 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." 33 And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

19 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. 2 He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on

your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." 3 But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. 4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; 5 and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." 6 Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, 7 and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. 8 Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." 9 But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. 10 But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. 11 And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

12 Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city—bring them out of the place. 13 For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it." 14 So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, "Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the city." But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting.

15 When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city." 16 But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. 17 When they had brought them outside, they[a] said, "Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed." 18 And Lot said to them, "Oh, no, my lords; 19 your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. 20 Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is

it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!" 21 He said to him, "Very well, I grant you this favor too, and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken.²² Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there." Therefore the city was called Zoar. [b]²³ The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

24 Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; 25 and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. 26 But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

27 Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; 28 and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace.

29 So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.
(NRSV translation)



Analysis.

Even a cursory look at the text reveals that this story is not about homosexuality at all. There are no depictions of men having consensual homosexual sex based in mutual desire. There are only two mentions of sex in the entire passage. They are both about rape. The first is the angry mob of all the men in the town demanding that the two foreigners who have just arrived in Sodom to come out in order to publically gang rape them. And the second is when Lot offers his two young daughters to the mob to “do to them as you please” (v.8).

Rape is about power, not love. It's not even about desire; it is about the power to control another person's body. For thousands and thousands of years, rape has been a tool of domination by conquering armies, slave owners, and those with enough physical, emotional, psychological, and/or institutional power to force themselves into the body of someone more vulnerable than themselves without consent. This case of attempted rape is no different.

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power to control another person's
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The text says that every single man in Sodom came to Lot's house (v.4). This is not a mob of gay men in a sexual frenzy driven by homosexual lust. Surely, most of the men had not even seen the two visitors. This is about subjugation and domination and xenophobia. This is about power and violence and keeping foreigners in their vulnerable position.

**"If they do not receive you and
care for you with warm
welcome
and hospitality, God
will be very displeased!"**

Looking at other references to Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible can also help shed light on their sinfulness. Two places where this story is revisited is Matthew 10:5-15 and Ezekiel 16:49-50.

Let's first examine the gospel account in Matthew. Here, Jesus is sending out the twelve disciples into Israel. He is ordering them to heal and proclaim the good news, but to take nothing with them: no money, no staff, no bag. They are to do the work of God and depend entirely on the hospitality of strangers in each town or village they enter for their survival.



In verses 14-15, Jesus pronounces that any town who does not welcome the disciples with hospitality will receive judgement worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jesus is using Sodom and Gomorrah as shorthand for “The people of Israel have a moral obligation take care of you as part of their covenant with God. If they do not receive you and care for you with warm welcome and hospitality, God will be very displeased! Remember what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah when they were inhospitable to strangers?”

Ezekiel 16:49-50 is even more explicit about why Sodom was destroyed by God:

49 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.
50 They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.
(NRSV translation)

Considering the harsh desert conditions, specific dietary laws, nomadic lifestyles, and often dangerous political climate of the Ancient Near East, hospitality was literally a matter of life and death. Withholding basic necessities from anyone in need—especially when God’s blessings were abundant—was not only a sign of greed, but a violation of Israel’s covenant with God. Hospitality was not only a custom of the ancient Hebrews, but a moral imperative, especially with regard to foreigners.

Exodus 22:21 explicitly forbids harming, oppressing, or wronging any foreigner in the land, because the people of Israel were once foreigners¹ in the land of Egypt. Hospitality to foreigners becomes an important sign of remembrance, respect, and gratitude to God for the deliverance of the people of Israel from enslavement in Egypt.

Hospitality was not only a custom of the ancient Hebrews, but a moral imperative, especially with regard to foreigners.

If there is political commentary on Sodom and Gomorrah that applies to us today, it is about welcoming in the immigrants and refugees among us. It is about sharing our abundant resources with those who do not have enough because of systems of violence, injustice, and domination.

In other words, if we want to apply the lessons of Sodom and Gomorrah to our day and time, then we should use it in conversations about immigration reform and social services rather than issues of sexual freedom.

¹ Leviticus 19:33-34



Discussion Questions.

1. Is the practice of homosexuality (i.e. consensual sex between people of the same sex based in erotic desire) truly the crime of Sodom that was so egregious that God rained down sulfur and fire, and destroyed the entire area and everyone in it?
2. Who sinned in this Bible story? Who is innocent? Consider each of these characters: Lot, the angels in disguise, Lot's daughters, the townspeople in Sodom, Lot's wife, God.
3. How would this passage be different if the angels were not disguised as men, but rather as women? Or trans people or gender nonconforming people or non-binary people? How would that change the story?
4. How and why do you think certain religious views on this text have extrapolated blanket condemnation of all LGBTQI people?
5. Can you think of an example of a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah?
6. What is your take-away from revisiting the Bible story of Sodom and Gomorrah? Does it have a moral imperative for us today?



Notes and Reflections.



About the Editor.

Reverend Alba Onofrio is a Southern Appalachian First-Gen Latin@ Queer Evangelical Femme, who lives and loves in community with QTPOC folks across the South in solidarity with those in the Global South.

Currently serving as the Spiritual Strategist for Soulforce, Alba focuses on spiritual healing & reclamation and subverting interlocking systems of domination by combating Christian supremacy & spiritual violence.

They hold a Masters of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School where their studies focused on the theologies of sex, embodiment, and ethics based in Queer desire. The call on their life is to eradicate shame and fear wherever they are found in order to make way for the New Creation that calls us all to live and love into our most authentic truths.

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