

Entertaining Angels: Hospitality or Hostility?

Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited

**A Bible Study Guide to
Genesis 19:1-11**

The Rev. Dr. Judith Hoch Wray

J.D. and Grace Company, Inc., 812 W. 181st Street, Suite 5, New York, NY 10033

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drwray@jdandgracecompany.com.**

**Wray, Judith Hoch
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About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Judith Hoch Wray is a progressive, feminist biblical scholar, preacher, teacher and writer. She earned a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and has taught at several theological seminaries in the United States. She is adjunct faculty, teaching Preaching, at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL, and is serving in 2006-2007 as a lecturer at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She is the author of numerous articles, books, and essays on the Bible, on preaching, Christian ministry, and on contemporary justice issues. A pastor and Bible teacher for over 35 years, Dr. Wray knows how to bring the scriptures to life for believers and seekers alike.



Dr. Wray is well-known as an excellent preacher and speaker and as an effective retreat and conference leader. Her passion for the scriptures and for making the Bible accessible to everyone energizes all of her presentations.

You may sign up for her occasional e-zine and to receive news of available Bible study and preaching resources by going to

<http://www.progressivebiblepreacher.com>.

To inquire about speaking or preaching engagements, write her at

drwray@jdandgracecompany.com.

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Introduction

Welcome to this Group Bible Study Guide for Genesis 19:1-11, a text usually identified as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Study Guide assumes that a group of persons will gather together to listen to the text and engage in a responsible study of the text and context of the story in order to get a clearer understanding its meaning for persons of faith today.

Of course, this study can be undertaken by an individual, though the benefits of the wisdom and perspectives of the community will be reduced. If you study this as an individual, you are encouraged to take the time to engage each of the activities and discussion questions recommended throughout the study guide.

Also note that a thorough study of this text will require several hours, even several sessions, of engagement by the group or individual. Take the time to read the primary biblical texts, other pertinent biblical texts, and the study guide. Take time to discuss the questions presented along the way.

I am believing that you will be blessed with new insights into the biblical text and into essential principles of Bible study, and that these insights will provide guidance as you address contemporary issues of hospitality and interaction with those who are strangers (or whom seem strange) to us.

Inhospitality and Sexual Violence

A Guided Group Bible Study of Genesis 19:1-11

One of the most misinterpreted texts in the Bible, this story about the necessity of hospitality invites our attention as we listen for wisdom about how to treat those who are strangers or different among us. The account sheds light on the seriousness of the requirement of hospitality in the ancient Near East, the relationship between humans and angels, and the place of women in that culture. Within those contexts are a number of challenges to responsible and faithful biblical interpretation.

Factors in Biblical Interpretation

Community

Before beginning this study, we do well to consider the principles of biblical interpretation which inform responsible and faithful interpretation of any text. Remember that impartial interpretation is not possible. Everyone reads any text, any situation, any received information through lenses that have been tinted by life experiences, received teaching, past experiences.

I am not impartial in my reading and interpretation of scripture. My life experience and received teaching have informed the way I see, hear and understand God's word.

You are not impartial in your reading and interpretation of scripture. Your life experience and received teaching have informed the way you see, hear and understand God's word.

Does that mean that no interpretation of scripture can be trusted? Not at all. It does mean that however one interprets and understands a text, humility is in order. God has yet more light to send forth from God's word. And that more light will probably be revealed in community.

As Christians, we study the scriptures in community, not so those in authority may define how others understand the texts, but so the perspectives and insights of the community may inform and enlighten the whole body together. Until that Day when we see the Christ face to face, we need each other and we need to share the different “parts” we see. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). In the meantime, the only certain community mode is faith in Christ, trust in God, and love for one another.

When we do biblical interpretation in community, with the whole people of God, we can receive the gift of multi-faceted perspectives. When we are honest about our own fears and questions related to the authority of scripture, the church can be open to whatever it may be that God wants to teach in this present situation. So find some friends to study this text with. Listen together for insights you may not have heard before.

Choices and Humility

Since the authority of scripture is at stake, we begin with an examination of the principles of biblical interpretation rather than with any particular doctrine or belief based on the scriptures. Whether we realize it or not, we all pick and choose which scriptures we read as “of God” and which scriptures we ignore or try to explain away. Determining on what basis we shall measure the faithfulness of a particular translation or interpretation is integral to our discernment process. At the same time, we are diligent to avoid bibliolatry

(the worship of the Bible as if the Bible were God), because bibliolatry is a form of idolatry, and idolatry is the root of many sins. Protestants have continuously confessed that we dare not replace the affirmation, “Jesus the Christ is the Word of God” with “the way I understand the Bible is the Word of God.”

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Christians have given their lives throughout the centuries in defense of the Gospel. Christians have also slaughtered others in the name of Christ, ostensibly in defense of the gospel. Good intentions do not necessarily lead to righteous results. Surely humility is the first requirement at this point in history.

Disciples of Christ have long proclaimed as a central principle of our fellowship and witness: “In essentials unity, in opinion diversity, in all things charity.” In the midst of attempts to discern wisdom for the church in this age, to interpret the scriptures responsibly, what are the essentials?

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

The following list includes principles generally accepted by scholars of the Bible, principles which I use whenever approaching a text. As we move through the study of Genesis 19, we will return to these principles to guide our interpretation.

1) **The meaning of any given text is conditioned by its immediate scriptural context.** For example: Someone can accurately say that the Bible says, "There is no God." However, the context corrects that reading: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God'" (Ps 14:1; 53:1, *NRSV*).

2) **The witness of the whole Bible serves to modify and correct the witness of individual parts.** For example: Certain biblical texts deny the possibility of resurrection [See Psalm 115:17; Eccl 9:5]. However, the general witness of the scriptures and the testimony concerning Jesus the Christ affirm, proclaim and expect the resurrection.

3) **The biblical texts were written in particular socio-historical contexts. To discern God's wisdom for a different socio-historical context, the dynamics and implications of the original context must be considered.** For example: We no longer require non-Jews to become circumcised in order to become Christians. We no longer quote the Bible to justify slavery. Most Christians no longer feel a need to obey the purity laws which forbid the eating of pork or shellfish.

4) **The life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the filter through which we finally discern the significance of the varied witnesses of the scriptures.**

5) **Humility** is the order of the day, lest we find ourselves, like Job, needing to confess that "...I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3).

Introduction to the Text

This text has long been used as justification for fear and hatred of persons who are lesbian, gay, and bisexual. The ancient storyteller, however, had a very different agenda, an agenda frequently lost in misinterpretation and prejudice. The suggestions for a nine-step group study of the text found below will provide a model for effective and faithful biblical interpretation which can be used with this and any other text. [You will note that I count the Postscript as Step Nine, even though it is not labeled as such.]

Genesis 19:1-11

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.

Step 1. Hearing the text

This story, like other ancient stories, was meant to be told aloud, probably around a campfire or while sitting near the source of heat in the home, teaching the children the moral values of the family and culture. Most Christians cannot understand the story in its original language, Hebrew. We can, however, hear the story aloud in order to participate, at least marginally, in the oral tradition from which this story sprung.

If you are studying in a group (the preferred method), ask one person to stand and read aloud as everyone *listens*. Do not follow along with your eyes. Listen to the story being read / told. Let someone else read so the group hears it in a different voice. Then everyone read it aloud (all at the same time) while walking around the room, allowing your body, mind and spirit to experience the text as well as hear it. Yes, I know that such behavior may seem strange at first. Trust the experience. Then as a group talk about the experience.

For group discussion:

What did you hear differently or afresh as you were reading it aloud while walking around the room? What word or phrase captured your attention? What feelings did you notice in your body?

Step 2. Asking questions

Based on your first experiential reading of the text, begin to list, as a group, the various questions what are raised in your mind. Such a list can aid you in the study process that will follow. No question is too silly, no question is out-of-bounds. Be honest with yourself and the text. Write the list of questions on newsprint, blackboard, whiteboard or power-point so that all may see them. Sample questions that may arise:

- (1) Verse one begins by identifying “the two angels” as if the hearer should know who they are. Where did they come from?
- (2) Why is Lot sitting in the gateway of Sodom?
- (3) Does Lot know they are angels?
- (4) Why does Lot address them as “my lords”?
- (5) Why do the angels at first resist Lot’s offer of hospitality?
- (6) What is the significance of the feast Lot makes for the angels?
- (7) The words “man” and “men” are repeated over and over in this account. What is the significance, if any, of that repetition?
- (8) Is “to know” really a biblical metaphor for sexual intercourse?
- (9) The narrator says every man in the city surrounded the house demanding to know the strangers who were in Lot’s house. What is the significance of this detail?
- (10) Does this text really condemn homosexual behavior?
- (11) Why would Lot offer his two daughters to the violent crowd of men?

Step 3. Getting Acquainted with the Context

Note: Every biblical text has a context. That means it belongs within the larger framework of the biblical book in which it is found and of the faith story of which it is a part. Responsible biblical interpretation requires an understanding of the context of any text.

Genesis 19:1-11 is only a small portion of the dramatic saga of Abraham and Sarah's relationship with God that begins in Genesis 12 and continues through the death of Sarah in Genesis 23 and the death of Abraham in Genesis 25. Foundational for the faith tradition of Jews and Christians, this saga is proclaimed as continuing far beyond their personal stories, as essential to the salvation story of many peoples and nations.

Genesis 19:1-11 appears to be the story of Lot, the two angels, two daughters, and all the men of Sodom. Its larger context, however, reveals that the story, to be understood, must include Abraham's interaction with three angels and their discussion about how many righteous persons might be found in Sodom in order to save the city from God's wrath.

Therefore, in order to understand chapter 19, the study must begin with Genesis 18. To skip this larger story is to skip essential insights into the reasons the story was told around many fires and why it was recorded in the Book of Genesis. As a group, read *aloud* the entire story of Sodom (or listen to the story being read): Genesis 18:1–19:29. (If you need to review the discussion about reading texts aloud found on page 9, please do so.)

For group discussion:

What insights or surprises did you hear as you listened to the larger story? Are there any parts of the story (or all of it?) that you want to hear again in order to gain a bit more clarity? Allow all participants, from the youngest to the oldest, an opportunity for their observations and questions to be voiced.

Group discussion continued:

Note how the Ancient Near East principle of hospitality is presented in this story:

- a) What hospitality does Abraham offer the three men who come to visit his tent?
- b) What acts of hospitality does Lot offer the two men (who are now identified to those who listen to the story as angels) when they arrive at the gateway of Sodom?
- c) Do you think Lot knew the men were angels?

Only gradually does the narrator unfold the identity of the three men who visited Abraham. Practice your textual detective skills. Where, in the narrative, are the men identified?

Step 4. Researching Key Concepts, Phrases, Words

One principle of responsible Bible study includes making sure that you understand key concepts, phrases, and words in the text in the ways they were understood by the writer and by those who first heard the story. Recognizing that, in the twenty-first century, we are so far removed from the culture of the original story, readers will want to retain a sense of detective work and of humility. Let us see what clues we can find in the text itself and in other ancient texts that will shed light on the story. And let us remain in a state of humility, defined as expecting to learn something new from each encounter with the text.

Surely it will be helpful to examine how Sodom and Gomorrah are discussed in other biblical texts. How is Sodom described? How is the sin of Sodom defined and in what context?

Sodom is mentioned, at least in passing, 23 times in the Bible. This list can be found in an unabridged concordance to the Bible or by doing a word search in an electronic version of the scriptures. Look briefly at these texts. Reading through this list suggests that the story of Sodom (or reference to it) was frequently used in morality tales among the Jewish communities. Most of these references assume the hearers understood the point of the story and so do not elaborate on the cause of Sodom's condemnation. Only a few texts become a bit more disclosing about the sins of Sodom.

As a group, read the following texts aloud. On newsprint, list the notable characteristics of Sodom and the context in which discussion of Sodom arises in these passages. How do these texts shed light on our study of the story?

Ezekiel 16:48-50

Matthew 10:5-15 / Luke 10:3-12

Jude 1:6-7 (Please see the Appendix, pp. 20-22, for important extra commentary on and study of Jude 6-7. Note to leader: this may require a full session of group study.)

Step 5. Examining Related Texts or Stories

Most stories in the Bible are not isolated tales. Stories not only appear in a specific literary context, they are also part of a tradition with a history. Traditional themes are revisited again and again with different characters and with slightly different nuances of meaning or outcomes. For example, note how many times the theme of man-meets-woman-at-a-well is repeated throughout the Bible. [See Genesis 24; Genesis 29; John 4] Examining these repeated traditions can shed light on the significance of each individual account.

As we read the story in Genesis 19:1-11, it will also be helpful to look at a similar story in Judges 19:22-30. In your group read aloud (or have someone read aloud) Judges 19:22-30.

For group discussion:

Compare and contrast this story with the account in Genesis 19.

What details of the stories are similar? Different? How does the “moral of the story” seem to differ between these two stories?

How might “tradition history” explain the similarities in the account?

How are we to hear God’s counsel in these texts as they relate to women and the rape of women?

Suggestion: Ask one or more persons from the group to read *Texts of Terror* by Phyllis Trible (Fortress, 1982) and to give a book report to the group.

Step 6. Receiving the Wisdom of the Text

Reread the story in Genesis 19:1-11 aloud. Revisit the questions you listed in step 2 (see page 7). Based on the study you have done so far, identify

- (a) answers to some of the questions;
- (b) new insights for your own life;
- (c) new questions that have been raised and further study you wish to pursue.

For group discussion:

How do your insights compare and contrast with what you have been taught previously about the sins of Sodom?

Why, do you think, has this story about the abominations of inhospitality and disrespectful boundary crossing (men with angels) been used to justify the condemnation of loving, same-gender relationships?

Discuss this story as the source of the saying, “You never know when you may be entertaining angels, unaware.”

Step 7. Bringing the Text to Life

As a group, recreate the drama of the story told in Genesis 18 and 19. Act it out. You may use either the ancient biblical format or a modern setting of the same story. Use all of the research you have done so far to inform your dramatic presentation. If you have a small group, each person may need to take on multiple roles:

- Abraham
- Sarah
- 3 “visitors”
- Lot
- Lot’s wife
- 2 angels (= 2 of Abraham’s visitors)
- Lot’s 2 daughters
- all the men of Sodom

After you have finished dramatizing the story, invite each person to discuss her or his feelings from the perspective of the characters each portrayed.

Finally, allow time for silent prayer and reflection. Listen for the Spirit’s teaching in the midst of this experience. Write/journal or draw/paint about this experience. [Note to the group leader: Be prepared with paper, pencils, crayons, paint, etc., to facilitate this experience.]

Invite each person to share their writing or art work with the group. Honor each person’s feelings and insights; listen and do not challenge. Discuss as a group how this experience added extra dimensions to your hearing of this biblical text.

Step 8. Reflecting after Bible Study

For group discussion:

Name the principles of biblical interpretation that inform your present understanding of this text.

What have you learned about effective, faithful Bible study from this process?

Note that this Bible study format did not urge Bible students to consult commentaries. Why? While many fine commentaries can be found, the tendency to rely on the wisdom of “professionals” often short-circuits the kind of diligent attention to the text that allows Holy Spirit to open up new insights and challenges in one’s life through the text. Commentators may or not be correct in their interpretations. Doing one’s own work first, before consulting a commentary provides a foundation for reading that commentary with some wisdom of one’s own. In other words, now is the time to check out a commentary or two, if you wish.

Name of commentary(s) consulted _____

Author(s) _____

Publisher _____ Publication Date _____

For group discussion:

At what points does the commentary that you consulted confirm or challenge your own insights from your study of the text?

What principles is the commentator using to come to the conclusions presented?

How does this add to your own understanding of this text in particular and of biblical interpretation in general?

Appendix

Notes on Translations, with Examples from Jude

In the context of exploring the meaning of ancient references to Sodom and Gomorrah, we find ourselves in need of examining another principle of Bible study that is frequently ignored: **every translation is an interpretation.**

The biblical writers did not speak English or any other modern language that we usually use in our Bible studies. The books that we now recognize as *The Bible* were written in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, and in various dialects of each of those languages.

We do not have any original manuscripts. We only have copies of copies of copies of copies. Each time the manuscript was copied and each time a biblical manuscript was translated from one language to another, the translator had to make decisions about what the original (sic!) text really meant.

And each translator brought his (very few if any were women) social and theological perspective to the text to help him decide how to transfer the meaning from one language to another. While we want to believe that each translator or team of translators had good intentions, we also can recognize that everyone is influenced by the ideas, experiences and doctrines that have informed one's life, ideas and doctrines that may be very different that those of the original story-tellers.

Review again some of my opening statements on Page 6:

Remember that impartial interpretation is not possible. Everyone reads any text, any situation, any received information through lenses that have been tinted by life experiences, received teaching, past experiences.

I am not impartial in my reading and interpretation of scripture. My life experience and received teaching have informed the way I see, hear and understand God's word.

You are not impartial in your reading and interpretation of scripture. Your life experience and received teaching have informed the way you see, hear and understand God's word.

Why am I reviewing all of this? Because the Jude text raises some critical questions about translation. Different translations of the Jude text seem to offer very different meanings. How you understand Jude 6-7 may depend on which translation you read.

And which translation you choose to read or are encouraged to read will influence how you understand the text. Most pastors direct their congregations to translations that come from translators who reflect the theological principles taught in that congregation. [Yes, and I call attention to the translation issues because I think many of the translations miss the point of a careful reading of the Greek text and its context.]

One way to counter the tendency to turn to translations that reflect one's own theological bias is to consult/study/read biblical texts in more than one translation. And if you have any knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, use it as you study the scriptures.

A careful look at the Jude text may illuminate the principle that "every translation is an interpretation" and illuminate the meaning of Genesis 19:1-11.

Here are four different translations of Jude 6-7:

And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.

(King James Version)

And the angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day. Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.

(New American Standard)

Appendix: Notes on Translations with Examples from Jude

And I remind you of the angels who did not stay within the limits of authority God gave them but left the place where they belonged. God has kept them chained in prisons of darkness, waiting for the day of judgment. And don't forget the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring towns, which were filled with sexual immorality and every kind of sexual perversion. Those cities were destroyed by fire and are a warning of the eternal fire that will punish all who are evil.
(New Living Translation)

And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.
(New Revised Standard Version)

Translation / Interpretation Questions:

For discussion: In what way do the translations seem to yield different meanings? List the questions raised by your groups' examination of the four translations above. Which translation would you choose and why?

My own observations of these verses and translations lead to the following notes. What is meant by "the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation" / "And the angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode" / "the angels who did not stay within the limits of authority God gave them" / "the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling"? Unless we understand the ancient stories behind that reference, we may misunderstand.

One clue may be found in Genesis 6:1-4 where we see the remnant of an ancient story about how the "sons of God" (angels?) came down and had intercourse with the daughters of humans. Immediately after that, in Genesis 6:5 we hear of God's observation of the wickedness of humankind and God's plan to exterminate all human life.

Intercourse between humans and angels became a major taboo in the culture, worthy of the greatest imaginable punishment. With that story in mind, we can read Jude with a little more understanding.

The Greek text identifies the men in Sodom and Gomorrah as, like the angels who were condemned by God, those who lusted after “strange flesh” (Gk: *sarkos heteras*). In other words, the men in Sodom were persons who wanted intercourse with angels. If we know that ancient story and prohibition, the Jude text begins to make more sense. The gross sexual immorality identified by Jude (and which matches a careful reading of Genesis 19) was the desire of humans to have intercourse with the angels who were visiting Lot. Such an abomination was the prime example of lack of the hospitality required by the ancient Near East cultures, and worthy of God’s worst judgment.

In 20th and 21st-century cultures that have obsessed about homosexuality, it has been easy to interpret the Greek phrase about “going after strange flesh” (KJV and NAS) as “every kind of sexual perversion” (NLT) and “pursued unnatural lust” (NRSV), and to read that translation as referring to homosexuality. That translation / interpretation, while supporting many persons’ theological beliefs, does not faithfully render the point either of Jude 6-7 or of Genesis 19:1-11.

Postscript

On Transforming Bible Study into Faithful Living

For me, the goal of responsible Bible study is always faithful living. That means I approach each text with a mind and spirit willing to be transformed by Holy Spirit's work in my life. Any outcome of Bible study that leaves me pointing my finger at another is probably not of God. I hear Jesus say to Peter, "What is that to you? You follow me" (See John 21:20-21).

So I am left with the question: How am I going to live my life differently because I have listened carefully to these stories in the Bible?

A fresh reading of Genesis 19:1-11 challenges our understanding of hospitality and of how we treat the foreigner or stranger. That means that I have to revisit my attitudes and actions around issues of immigration. That means I will confront my own Xenophobia (fear of those who are different).

This study also means that I cannot be silent when misinformed persons try to use the Sodom and Gomorrah story to condemn persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. A responsible understanding of principles of biblical interpretation will also inform my attitudes toward the continuing sexism of our twenty-first-century world. So long as the church and society are more energized by gay-bashing than by preventing the abuse of women, we remain guilty of sin worthy of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah.

**How am I going to live my life differently because I have listened carefully to these stories in the Bible?
Will we configure our congregational life differently? How?**

I leave you with similar questions. When the angels in our midst come to your door, will they be received with hospitality or hostility? Your answer may have eternal consequences; it will certainly have temporal consequences for many of those marginalized in our society.