

Book Reviews

Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth*. Equinox, London, 2004, pp. 226, ISBN 1-9047-6829-6 (hbk), 1-9047-6830-X (pbk). Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v20i3.357

Each year, our faculty runs a cross-disciplinary course on sexuality and society. I come in for the three hours on religion, focusing on Christianity. Since sexuality is tangential to my main research and teaching, the annual round is a welcome opportunity to look at the field from a fresh angle and catch up with new work.

There's been plenty around on Christianity and the body, and when we cover feminist theologies the challenge is not to overwhelm the students with the massive amount on offer. The field is sparser in queer theology, but nevertheless rich resources are on offer from the angle of systematic theology and ethics, such as Elizabeth Stuart's *Just Good Friends* (1996) and Mark Jordan's *The Silence of Sodom* (2002). But Biblical Studies has always been harder to resource, and often where students, especially from conservative Protestant backgrounds are most curious ('But what about Sodom and Gomorrhah?').

Thank goodness for *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth*, by the University of Queensland's Michael Carden. *Sodomy* offers a detailed close reading of two biblical passages, Genesis 19 and Judges 19, but it offers much more as well.

To start with the close reading, Carden's focus is the account of threatened gang rape of Lot's angelic visitors, culminating in the destruction of Sodom, and the threatened gang rape of a traveling Levite, culminating in the gang rape and death of his concubine. Following Bailey, Carden argues that the 'sin of Sodom' was not homosexual desire but lack of hospitality to strangers. Of course, theological liberals have been drawing on this interpretation for years, but I must admit to always having found 'lack of hospitality' a pretty weak description for threatened gang rape. Moreover, on its own, it could even be taken as implying endorsement (of a sort) for Lot's attempt to avert the threat by offering his own daughters in the angels' place (at least he was trying to do the right thing by the guests!) or an implication that, if someone gets raped, it is somehow 'better' if the victim is a woman rather than a man.

Carden avoids any such travesties. Reading his analysis feels as if conventional interpretations have been rotated ninety degrees—and suddenly make sense. He points, first, to the curious point that, while the threatened rape of the male guests dominates interpretation of the Sodom story, the threatened rape of the Levite has seldom been an interpretative focus for the Gibeah story. The fate of the concubine overshadows the threat to the Levite. Yet, as Carden points out, 'this story is... about attempted pack rape of a man, which is diverted to the successful pack rape of a woman' (p. 26).

From numerous angles—anthropological, historical, literary—Carden reminds us that the conventional take on Sodom, painting the perpetrators as homosexual and therefore sinful, misses the point. They are not stories about same-sex desire, but about rape. As

Carden memorably puts it: 'The Sodomites have not come to Lot's house to invite the angels to an orgy' (p. 21). The sin is not lust, but violence. Punishment comes not for desiring others, but for abusing, belittling and objectifying them. As with modern homophobic violence, so in the ancient societies featured in the stories: male rape objectifies the victim, not the perpetrator.

Under this phallogocentric mechanism, normative maleness, masculinity, is defined by penetrating others not by whom one penetrates. The male, penetrated by other men, is stigmatized or, to use our parlance, is 'the queer', while the male who penetrates is not so stigmatized; he is not 'the queer' (pp. 30-31).

Carden's exegetical goal is summed up in his hope that the stories can 'be detoxified for queer people' and become instead 'resources for social change'. He concludes that 'If there is a sexual sin or evil to Sodom and Gibeah, then I would argue that it is precisely this system' of racism and xenophobia mutually reinforced by, and reinforcing, compulsory heterosexuality.

He is surely right to guess that his 'position might surprise many people so used to Sodom being invoked as a sign of divine abhorrence of same-sex desire' (p. 38). Yet, to those sceptical of such invocation but who have also found revisionist readings unpersuasive, Carden's careful exegesis, interdisciplinary awareness, moral vision and lucid explanation are likely to come as a breath of fresh air.

Carden's aim is only partly to persuade us about how we should interpret the stories. The rest of the book deals with reception and interpretation of the texts in Jewish and Christian scholarship. Exploring the fortunes of two texts over many centuries, this aspect of Carden's work will interest scholars of textual reception and interpretation. He wants to demonstrate how stories with remarkable similarities came, by the late medieval period, to be interpreted so differently. While Gibeah was understood as having little to say about homoeroticism, Sodomy had become emblematic of it. Moreover, what it signified had become 'a state of rebellion, for which the only response can be genocidal mass murder', or even 'the omnicidal sterilizing of the earth' (p. 193).

He concludes that the difference in Christian interpretation of the two stories (Jewish readings have not diverged so starkly) is far from incidental, asking,

Is it because a homophobic interpretation of Gibeah is much harder to sustain, so that such an interpretation of Sodom requires its near-suppression? Is not this suppression an act of complicity in the woman's rape and murder? Does not the very success of the Christian homophobic interpretation of Sodom entail the failure of Christians to develop any meaningful moral discourse on rape? (p. 195).

On the foundation of Carden's persuasive analysis, we cannot but be moved by his warning:

Sodom's history in the tapestry of Christianity shows that by replacing power structures of oppression and exclusion with more power structures of oppression and exclusion one is simply building a new Sodom on the ruins of the old (p. 198).

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