THE TROUBLE WITH SODOM: LITERARY RESPONSES TO BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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From the beginning there was much that troubled the English about the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament. The earliest discussion in English of the problems of biblical translation, Ælfric’s preface to his version of Genesis written around the year 1000, emphasizes how dangerous the Bible could be in the wrong hands and how taxing it could be to make the Bible mean what one would like it to mean. Sexual relations were always a particularly troublesome issue, and they are the first problem mentioned by Ælfric, in his account of the half-learned priest who claimed that the patriarch Jacob had four wives - a claim presumably adduced in support of the concubinage practised by late Anglo-Saxon nobility. The Old Testament took for granted attitudes and emphases that seemed strange to a different society; in their responses and retellings, we can find the English registering their own anxieties and obsessions, sometimes by introducing sexual issues where they were not evident before.

This paper focuses on one of the most disturbing episodes in the Old Testament, the story of Sodom as described in Genesis 19. The story tells us that God determined to investigate the sins of the city of Sodom and sent two angels who were given hospitality by Lot; the men of Sodom besieged his house, demanding that the two visitors be brought out so that the Sodomites might ‘know’ them; Lot offered his two daughters as substitutes but the Sodomites refused and tried to break in; the angels escorted Lot and his family out of the city and Sodom was destroyed by fire; Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt and he and his daughters took refuge in a cave, where his daughters got him drunk and slept with him. At first sight this is a story of sexual melodrama to rival the best that modern tabloid journalism can provide: an apparent attempt at homosexual rape of angels, a father’s offer of his daughters for rape

or prostitution, and a strange case of sexual abuse of a parent by his children. Yet one of the first questions we have to ask is how far this was originally a story about sexuality at all – and if so, what kind? Several modern commentators, notably Derrick Bailey in the fifties and John Boswell in 1980, have argued that when in the Bible the people of Sodom surround Lot’s house and order him to bring out the men so that they may know them, the verb to know is being used in its literal sense. They point out that that is its usual sense in the Old Testament, and that when later books of the Old Testament refer to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah they never suggest a sexual dimension, still less a homosexual one. Bailey and Boswell argue that the episode is essentially concerned with the question of hospitality to strangers: Lot, as a resident alien himself, welcomed the angels without asking who they were, while the native Sodomites demanded to exercise their right to see and interrogate all visitors. Boswell in particular suggests that the familiar interpretation of the story, as an archetypal account of homosexual depravity, and the meaning of the name Sodomite, were in the main later developments, becoming dominant only with the rapidly increasing homophobia of the thirteenth century.

In the face of such revisionist readings put by Bailey and Boswell, Peter Coleman has reiterated the traditional view of what happened at Sodom, pointing out that the verb to know is used in its sexual sense a little later in the chapter, by Lot’s daughters, and that Lot’s offer of his virgin daughters to the Sodomites, to do whatever they like with, does suggest that he sees the demands as sexual. The argument is convincing but the point remains, as Coleman urges, that the sexual issue may still have been a minor aspect of the story to the original writers and readers of Genesis. The crime of the Sodomites may have been not that they were habitually homosexual but that they were showing their hostility to the visitors by a threat of rape; there seem to be parallels to this notion in other cultures, and the narrative context of Genesis does seem to emphasize the issue of hospitality to God and to strangers. Certainly there seems nothing in the text, or in the wider context of the Old Testament, to suggest that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah of which God has heard, and which prompt him to investigate and destroy the cities, are sexual, still less homosexual. The later determination to read Sodom as essentially a symbol of sexual depravity says as much about later concerns as about the world that produced Genesis. But it is clear that this kind of


interpretation had already set in even before the coming of Christianity, in Jewish commentary. It is particularly strong in the work of Philo, writing in Alexandria in the second century B.C., who sees the story as an account of God's dire punishment of the terrible sin of homosexuality. There may be an attempt here to use the story to establish a sharp distinction between the Hellenic culture and mores of Alexandria and the culture and mores of the Jews. Such a reading was then taken up by early Christian writers, with gradually increasing confidence and intensity. And that need to distinguish, to polarize, to invest the Genesis narrative with sharp and weighty moral distinctions, is a recurrent feature of retellings of the stories.

The other two aspects of Genesis 19 which ought to concern us - Lot's offer of his daughters to the Sodomites for sexual purposes and the subsequent incest - seem to have caused less stir and comment amongst later writers. The logic of the narrative is of course to present Lot as the elect of God, the faithful individual who is saved when all others are destroyed. The offer of his daughters in place of the angels is presumably to be read as reflecting a proper sense of respect for God and his emissaries, like Abraham's offer of his son, while the incest by which new tribes are engendered may be read as an aspect of Lot's salvation, providing him with new progeny in place of those whom he lost when his two prospective sons-in-law refused to leave Sodom and were destroyed. On the whole, Christian tradition accepted that narrative logic; in the *Visio Pauli*, St Paul sees those who have committed the sin of Sodom boiling in Hell, but in Paradise he meets Lot, who explains that he has been rewarded for offering his daughters to the Sodomites. But the commentary tradition does reflect a degree of unease with these incidents, especially the incest, as we shall see.

The symbolic but uncertain significance of the Sodom story is evident in one of the earliest English references, a letter written by St Boniface to Æthelbald king of Mercia around 744, complaining that the people of England were lusting according to the fashion of the people of Sodom. The reference to the degenerate offspring of such practices shows that whatever sexual activity this was it was not homosexuality; Boniface seems to be using it as a general derogatory term to cover, as he puts it, 'despising lawful marriage and preferring incest, promiscuity, adultery and impious union with religious and cloistered women' - i.e. any kind of illicit sex. But for Alcuin, writing towards the end of the eighth century, the story has already acquired its more familiar weight of significance. In a series of questions and answers about knotty points in Genesis,
supposedly raised by his protégé Sigewulf, he deals with the distinction between the Sodom story and the narrative of the Flood. In the Gospels and again in the Epistle of St Peter these two events are yoked together as the two great examples of God's punishment of sinners, foretastes of the end of the world, but for Alcuin they offer an important contrast. Sigewulf asks why it was that in the days of Noah God punished the sin of the world by water while he punished the sin of the Sodomites with fire, and Alcuin replies that God employed the milder element of water to punish lechery with women, this being a natural sin, and invoked the fire of the fiercer element to punish lechery with men, this being a sin against nature; and for the same reason, he goes on, the Flood restored and revived the earth while the fire at Sodom made the earth there barren for ever. Alcuin thus reads both events as primarily stories about lechery, and polarizes them as an opposition of heterosexual and homosexual sin. The association of the Flood with sexuality is not of course explicit in Genesis, but seems to depend on reading the miscegenation described in 6:2, when the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair and took wives from among them, as itself the sin which prompted the Flood rather than simply the origin of the population who sinned. In his brief comment on that verse Alcuin explains that it meant the descendants of Seth marrying among the daughters of Cain but does not elaborate on its significance.

Apart from this polarization of the Flood and Sodom, the other point that strikes one forcefully about Alcuin's answer is its exclusively male-centred perspective: the contrast is between male sex with women, which is natural, and male sex with men, which is not, and there is no reference to the involvement of women or hint of an explanation as to why the women of Sodom were destroyed too. The failure to ask that question is all the more striking because Sigewulf does ask why God destroyed the children of the Sodomites as well as the adults; there seems to be an assumption here that the women were somehow implicated in the sins of the Sodomites as the children were not, but Alcuin does not explain how. They seem

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9 Ibid., 526.
10 'Si judicium Dei iustum est, quare infantes in Sodomis simul cum parentibus cremati sunt?' (ibid., 541).
simply to be a blind-spot for him. A similar, though in some ways still more curious, blind-spot is evident in the *Visio Pauli*, where St Paul sees men and women being tormented in Hell and asks who they are; the angel replies that they are those who committed the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, *masculi in masculos*, ‘male persons on male persons’, and because of that their pains will never end.\(^1\)

Alcuin has nothing to say about Lot’s offer of his daughters, but he devotes some space to justifying their incest. Staunchly defending the daughters, he argues that they thought the whole world had been destroyed and therefore chose what seemed to them the lesser crime, incest, rather than neglect their duty to repopulate the world.\(^2\) It is of course a very unconvincing argument since Lot and his daughters had earlier taken refuge in the city of Segor, while Sodom and Gomorrah were being destroyed, and there were plenty of inhabitants there. In Genesis itself the daughters’ concern seems rather that there is no-one of their own kindred or tribe to mate with them; it reflects the characteristic Old Testament concern to keep marriage within the tribe, but that could hardly have made sense to a Christian society anxious to prohibit marriages within the kindred. Alcuin goes on to offer a further defence: that the daughters only did it once and made no attempt to repeat the offence; it was therefore not incest since there was no sexual desire. That intriguing distinction between intention and act is also applied to Lot: his crime in Alcuin’s view is not incest but drunkenness, presumably because in his drunken and unconscious state he too had no sexual desire and no intention.\(^3\) (Alcuin’s follower, Rabanus Maurus, remarks on this point, incidentally, that if Genesis did not specifically say that Lot was unconscious one would find it quite incredible, because in the course of nature *non capiat coire quempiam nescientem*,\(^4\) which presumably means that coition does not take hold of someone without him knowing about it.)

Some of the points which Alcuin makes about Sodom and the Flood were picked up and developed by a later English writer, Ælfric of Eynsham, around the year 1000. In his vernacular adaptation of Alcuin’s questions on Genesis he develops and intensifies the moral contrast between the Flood and Sodom:

Why did God decide to destroy the Sodomites with burning sulphur and in Noah’s Flood the sinful were punished with water? In Noah’s days God punished men’s lechery with the gentler element of water because they sinned with women, and the Sodomites sinned shamefully against nature, and they were therefore consumed with sulphurous fire, so that their foul lechery should be punished with foul sulphur. In Noah’s Flood the earth was cleansed and revived, and in the

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\(^1\) See James, *Apocrypha anecdota*, 32.
\(^2\) *Patrologia Latina*, 100, 542.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Rabanus Maurus, *Patrologia Latina*, 107, 559.
punishment of the Sodomites the earth was burnt up and will for ever be unfruitful and covered with foul water. In Noah’s day God said of the sinful, my spirit will not remain for ever in these people because they are flesh. The spirit signifies here God’s anger, as if God said, I will not hold these people to eternal punishments, because they are frail, but I will give them their due punishment for their folly here in this world. This is not written about the Sodomites, who shamefully sinned against nature, for they are condemned for eternity.  

The notion that the Flood was primarily a punishment for (hetero-) sexual sins is one touched on in Ælfric’s earliest introductory homily, where he remarks in passing that at that time very many people turned to evil and angered God with various sins, and most of all with fornication (forliger). His evidence for this is not given, but it appears not to be related to the miscegenation described in Genesis 6:2, for in his later translation of Genesis he interprets the sons of God not, as Alcuin does, as the descendants of Seth coupling with the female descendants of the accursed Cain, but simply as good men who took wives from among the daughters of men. Such marriage hardly looks like miscegenation or indeed fornication. It looks as if Ælfric was driven here by the need to polarize the Flood against Sodom, to construct an illicit but pardonable heterosexuality as a contrast to damnable homosexuality.

The latter is strongly characterized in Ælfric’s translation of Genesis, where he evidently cannot bring himself to describe what happened at Sodom. After describing Lot’s entertainment of the angels he interjects a violent denunciation of Sodomite practices: ‘That nation was so shameful that they would foully against nature satisfy their lust, not with women, but so foully that we are ashamed to say it openly, and that was their “noise”, that they openly practised their filth’. (Note here too how se leodscipe, ‘the nation’,

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15 ‘Hwi wolde god þa ylcan sodomitiscan mid byrnmendum swæfel adydan . and on noes flode wurdon þa synfyllan mid wætere gewitnode? On noes dagum gewitnode god mana galnyssy mid wætere mid libran gesceafte: for þan þe hi syngodan mid wifum . and þa sodomitiscan syngodone bysmorlice ongean gecynd . and wurdon forþi mid swæflnen fyre forswæledæ; þæt heora fule galnyysse wurde mid þam fulan swæfel gewitnod; On noes flode was seo corðe afeormaþ . and eft geedecucod . and on þæs sodomitiscra gewitnunge forban seo corðe . and bið æfre unwæstmbære . and mid fulum wætere ofergan: On noes dagum cwæð god be þam synfyllum, ne þurhwunæg min gast on þisrum mannum on ecnyssy. forþon þe hi synd flæsc; Se gast getacnað her godes yrre . sywine god cwæde, Nelle ic þis mennisc gehealdan to þam ecum witum . forþam þe hi synd tyddre . ac ic wylle her on worulde him don edlean heora gedwyldes; Nis na þus awritten be þam sodomitiscan . þe ongean gecynd sceamlice syngodote. forþan þe hi synd ecelice fordemedæ. ’Ælfric’s A-S version of Alcumi Interrogationes Sigewulfi in Genesin, ed. G.E. MacLean, Anglia, 6 (1883), 425–73 and Anglia, 7 (1884), 1–59, at p. 48 (vol. 7).


17 Heptateuch, 99.

18 ‘Se leodscipe wasa bysmorful, þæt hi woldon fullice ongean gecynd heora galnyssæ gefyllan, na mid wimmannum, ac swa fullice þæt us sceamæ hjt openlice to scegenne, and þæt wasa heora hream, þæt hi openlice heora fyldæ gefremedon.’ Heptateuch, 132.
is silently interpreted as the adult male inhabitants.) He then passes straight on to the angels' warning to Lot to leave Sodom, without mentioning the arrival of the Sodomites, their demand for the angels or the offer of the daughters. If Ealdorman Æthelweard, who apparently commissioned the translation, was not already familiar with the Genesis narrative he must have been baffled as to why Ælfric should interject his denunciation at that point, and puzzled about the sequence of events. For Ælfric, male homosexuality was evidently the prevailing practice at Sodom and the reason for the city's destruction, and it was a sin so appalling that it could not be described. (It is of course possible too that he was reluctant to mention Lot's questionable offer of his daughters as sexual objects.)

By contrast, the incest of Lot seems to have interested Ælfric very little. His translation of the episode uses matter-of-fact language that reveals no area of controversy or particular concern, and his adaptation of Alcuin's commentary on Genesis omits the questions about this scene. One small detail of his translation of Genesis does though suggest an interest in justifying the daughters, perhaps prompted by Alcuin. Where the elder daughter in Genesis says that 'there is no-one living in the land [in terra] who can come into us in the way of the whole world', where in terra can readily mean 'in this region', in Ælfric's version she says 'no other man has survived in the whole world who can have us'. The one other possibly significant detail occurs when the Vulgate says, twice over, that Lot did not know when the daughter lay down with him or when she got up. Ælfric says, both times, that Lot did not know 'how he laid hold of her' [hu he befeng on hi], as if to emphasize his complete innocence and unawareness of sexual activity while simultaneously acknowledging that what was involved was indeed an action by Lot as much as by his daughters; he evidently cannot quite accept the Bible's implications of male passivity. Against the homosexuality of the Sodomites - damnable and indescribable - stands the incest of Lot and his daughters - illicit, forbidden, tabooed, yet heterosexual and therefore easily described and easily pardoned. The same kind of opposition is constructed in his version of Alcuin's commentary on Genesis, where, immediately preceding his critique of Sodom, Ælfric raises the story of Abraham taking a concubine and justifies him on the grounds that his motive was exclusively one of procreation (suggested to him by his own wife) and that the old law was not so strict on this subject as the Christian law.

Ælfric's translation of Genesis, and parts of other books of the Pentateuch, were subsequently incorporated into a full translation of the Hexateuch, which was in turn furnished with a set of illustrations, and the illustrations and annotations reflect some of the

19 "Nan oðer wer ne belaf on ealre eorþan, de unc mage habban" Heptateuch, 134.
distinctions and issues already discussed. Thus the picture illustrating Genesis 6:2, on the sons of God or good men taking wives from among the daughters of men (see fig. 1), shows a rather charming and romantic picture of men embracing and kissing some attractive looking women, in what seems a wholly respectable manner. When the wicked people of Sodom are first referred to in Genesis 13, the picture shows a group of men framed by a scroll held by a devil to show their wickedness, but they seem not to be doing anything significant (see fig. 2). There are no pictures of the Sodomite attack on the angels or of Lot offering his daughters because there is of course no text of those incidents; there are only pictures of Lot entertaining the winged angels to a meal in his house. There are, though, pictures of Lot and his daughters after the fall of Sodom. Folio 33r shows the three of them sitting cosily in a cave. Folio 33v has two pictures, each with a double scene. The top one shows on the left the two girls plying Lot with drink, and on the right, in what looks like the bedroom cave, Lot and his elder daughter lying snugly and decorously asleep in bed, both on their backs and covered by a blanket. The lower picture repeats the two scenes, with the younger daughter (see fig. 3). The pictures exude an extraordinary sense of cosy domesticity rather than shock or sensuality. And on the next page we have similarly cosy pictures of the women giving birth and bathing the babies, as if what is being narrated is a typical story of family life (see fig. 4).

Some time in the twelfth century, however, two or more scribes, probably at Canterbury, added a series of exegetical comments in Latin and English to this manuscript, in the margins and on the pictures, and they paid particular attention to the incest scene. Starting on the first picture of Lot and his daughters and continuing on the next, the commentator writes:

Jerome says that the daughters could be excused because they believed that the human race would die out and the piety of posterity excused the impiety of incest. But this does not excuse the father. His lack of faith was the cause of incest. About this Strabo says that Lot was inexcusable, first because he did not believe the angels’ assurance that he would be safe in Segor, and secondly because he was drunk and sin was the cause of sin. Alternatively, it is said that he did not know it was his daughter but thought it was his wife.

20 The Old English illustrated Hexateuch (British Museum Cotton Claudius B.iv), eds C.R. Dodwell and P. Clemoes, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, 18 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1974).
21 The manuscript was at St Augustine's Canterbury by the fifteenth century, and the twelfth-century English annotations show Kentish dialect features; Dodwell and Clemoes, Hexateuch, 15-16.
22 'Dicit ieronymus filias posse excusari quia crediderunt genus [MS genuus] humanum defecisse. et pietas posteritatis impietatem incestus excusavit. Set hoc patrem non excusat. Set infidelitas eius causa fuit incestus. De codem Strabo ait loth inexcusabili est. primo quia angelo non credidit se posse saluere in segor; denique quia inebriatus est. et fuit peccatum causa peccati. Vel dicitur nescisse fuisset filiam. putans fuisset uxorem suam.'
Figure 1
The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, fo. 12v (Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, vol. 18, from British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B. iv, s. xi). Left: Noah and his wife and sons (Genesis 5: 32). Right: men find women attractive and choose them for wives (Genesis 6: 2). See p. 104.
Figure 2
The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, fo. 23v (Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, vol. 18, from British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B. iv, s. xi\textsuperscript{1}). Lot sits within a building; a devil encircles the sinful men of Sodom with a scroll (Genesis 13: 12–13).
See p. 104.
Figure 3

The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, fo. 33v (Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, vol. 18, from British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B. iv, s. xi). Lot’s daughters give him wine and his younger one sleeps with him (Genesis 19: 35). See p. 104.
Figure 4
The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, fo. 34r (Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, vol. 18, from British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B. iv, s. xi). Lot's elder and younger daughters give birth to sons. See p. 104.
It is a very interesting distinction, and in some respects one strikingly sympathetic to the female position. The daughters are innocent although they plotted to get their father drunk and deliberately committed incest with him, but Lot is guilty even though he was made drunk and didn’t know what was happening. The point about lack of faith presumably reflects a sense of patriarchal duty: it was Lot’s responsibility to sustain his daughters’ belief that the world had not been destroyed, and presumably to keep them in Segor where other men were available, and his fault if they misunderstood. But if the daughters are innocent because their ultimate (if misguided) intentions were good, it is hard to see how Lot’s entirely unintentional drunkenness and incest can make him guilty. The final point in the commentary seems to suggest that Lot, though drunk, was aware that he was engaging in sexual activity but thought on both occasions that the other person was his wife, though she had earlier been turned into a pillar of salt. This fantasy may be meant to excuse Lot or simply to explain how the drunkenness led to incest (given Rabanus Maurus’s argument that coition is normally conscious). But it does suggest, in opposition to the Ælfrician translation and the pictures illustrating it, that in Lot’s case at least there was sexual awareness and desire. Here then is one early reader of the Old English Hexateuch who was not entirely comfortable with the matter-of-fact treatment of the incest scene, the easy excusing of Lot and Ælfric’s polarization of pardonable heterosexuality against the sin of Sodom.

In some ways the most interesting of the Anglo-Saxon treatments of Sodom and the Flood is to be found in the Old English poem Genesis A, which shows none of this intensity of horror about Sodom and makes a rather different connection with the Flood. The poem’s first reference to the people of Sodom, paraphrasing Genesis 13:13, stresses their sinfulness without being specific: ‘they were bold in sins, faulty in their deeds, brought upon themselves a bad course for ever; Lot would never adopt their customs but . . . kept himself apart and fair, virtuous and patient, just as if he didn’t know what they were doing’. When it comes to Genesis 18 and God himself speaks of their sins, they seem curiously like a warrior-band turned somewhat drunk, noisy and ill-

23 Wæron Sodomisc cynn synnum þriste,
dædum gedwolene; dragon heora selfra
econe unræd. Æfre ne wolde
þam leodþæwum Loth onfon,
ac hine fægre heold,
þeawfaest and gæþylig on þam þeodscipe,
emne þon gelicost, lara gemyndig,
þe he ne cune ĥawet þa cynn dydon.
behaved: ‘I can hear revelry in this city, the noise of sinners very loud, the vaunting of people merry with ale, a host holding evil talk inside the walls; they are oath-breakers, heavy with sins. I will find out now what those people are doing, whether they commit sins in their thought and deeds as much as they talk evil and hostility.'

We then have some lost text covering Abraham’s attempt to dissuade God from destroying all the inhabitants, and the poem resumes with ‘men were awaiting punishment, sorrow within the walls, and their wives too. Proud in their hosts they repaid the Lord evil for good’.

A similar picture is given later at line 2581 when the poet pauses to explain the destruction of Sodom: ‘pride and wine-drinking overcame them, so that they became too keen on evil deeds, bold in their sins, forgot the true laws of God and who it was who had given them the benefits and the glory in the cities’.

Lawrence Mason renders the opening clause, 'hie þæs wulcno onwod and wingedrync', as ‘riches and feasting overcame them’, but it seems to be a variant on the collocation 'wlonc and wingal', generally rendered something like ‘proud and flushed with wine’, which is used of the prosperous city-dwellers of the past in other Old English poems – nostalgically in *The Ruin* and more scornfully in *The Seafarer* – and I think the sense is of a confident and boisterous community, with overtones of the heroic society.

The poet presents the citizens’ demands on the angels in a precise, non-euphemistic and curiously untroubled language: ‘They said that they intended to have sex with those men,

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24 Ic on þisse byrig bearhtum gehyre,
synnigra cyrm swide hludne,
ealogaða gylp, yfele sprecce
werod under weallum habban; forþon wætlogona sint,
folces firena hefge. Ic wille fandigan nu,
mago Ebrea, hwæt þa men don,
gif hie swa swide synna fremmæd
þeawum and gefhæ ðon, swa hie on þweorð spreacæ
facen and inwit. (II.2408–16)

25 Weras basnedon witelaces,
wean under weallum, and heora wif somed.
Dugubum w lança drihtne guidon
god mid gynne. (II.2419–23)

A.N. Doane renders this phrase *dugudum wlance* as ‘proud in their riches’, reflecting a rabbinic tradition that the Sodomites were very wealthy and corrupted by their wealth (*Genesis A: a new edition*, ed. A.N. Doane [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978]). But *dugud* does have a range of meanings, including military troops.

26 Hie þæs wulcno onwod and wingedrync
þæt hie firendæda to frece wurdon,
synna þriste, sod ofergeaton,
drihtnes domas, and hwæ him dugæða forgeat,
blæd on burgum. (II.2581–5)

shamelessly.²⁸ (haeman is the standard term for having sexual intercourse in Old English). Lot, in offering his daughters, is described by the narrator as ‘one who knew a good plan, mindful of wisdom’, and the wording of his proposal is very explicit: ‘I will give them to you, rather than have you work something shameful against nature’ (though ‘against the created order or condition of men’ is perhaps closer to wīd gesceapu); ‘take the women and let my guests have peace’, he urges.²⁹ The offer of the daughters is thus presented as an act of wisdom, and we can read it as the proper act of sacrificing his own family to protect his guests, and perhaps also as the virtuous act of saving the Sodomites from a work of unnatural or non-ordained shame by offering them a chance of natural sex instead. It is clear that what the Sodomites propose or threaten is a homosexual act and that it is shameful and against creation. But there is no suggestion in all the poet’s comments before or after this point that it is a defining characteristic of Sodomite society, or that it is what constitutes the sin of which God has heard and for which he destroys them. The incidental reference to the women as well as the men at line 2420, awaiting punishment for their crimes, indicates that for this poet male sexuality is not the characterizing vice of the people of Sodom. Their vices seem to be the general vices of a prosperous city-dwelling society where people drink too much and become arrogant. And it is interesting that the poet should conceive of homosexual activity, whether as an act of aggression or one of desire, as something which one might readily find in such a society.

The beginning of the incest scene is lost, presumably because it was on a leaf otherwise left blank for a picture of the scene. In what is left, the poet emphasizes that Lot did not have the faintest idea of what was happening to him: ‘the elder daughter went to him, drunk on his bed, the father of both of them. The white haired one did not know when the women were as a bride to him, being imprisoned fast in mind and thought within his breast, so that he could not perceive the visit of the maidens, being drunk with wine’.³⁰ The language, with its emphasis on his age and captivity, presents him as an unconscious, passive victim-figure, having his body used by the two

²⁸ ... wordum cwædon
   þæt mid þam hæleoðum haeman wolden
   unscomlice. (lI.2459–61)
²⁹ ‘se ðe oft raed ongeat . snytra gemynigig’; ‘ic eow sylle þa, ær ge sceonde wīd gesceapu fremmen’; ‘onfod þæm fæmnum, lætad frīd agon gistas mine’ (lI.2462, 2465, 2470–1, 2473–4)
³⁰ druncnum eode
   seo yldre to ær on reste
   heora þege fæder. Ne wiste blondenfeax
   hwonne him fæmnan to bryde him bu wæron,
   on þehtcōtan fæste geneawod
   mode and gemynde; þæt he maegða sīd
   wine druncen gewitan ne meahte. (lI.2600–6)
active women. It is of course striking that the sexual activity should spring so emphatically from the same wine-drinking which the poet attributes repeatedly to the Sodomites, as if to invite a comparison between two stories of fall. The drunkenness may be emphasized in order to excuse or explain Lot's sexual misdemeanour, but the point seems rather the way in which drink incapacitates him and makes him helpless. One cannot help being reminded of another Old Testament scene, similarly dramatized in Anglo-Saxon poetry, in which a man rendered helpless by drink and lying unconscious on his bed is manhandled and abused by two confident and active women – the killing of Holofernes by Judith with her maid. By an appropriate irony the term *genearewad*, meaning imprisoned or constrained, here used of Lot, had earlier been used in the *Genesis* poem of the curse imposed because of Eve's sin on all women, who are destined to be *genearewad* henceforth by fear of males (line 921).

The other point about the language of this scene is the way in which it unembarrassedly stresses the incestuous aspect: 'the elder daughter went to their father . . . the women became as brides to him . . . the beloved sisters brought forth into the world sons to their old father. The mother, daughter of Lot, named one of those princes Moab'.

The incest seems not to worry the poet; the state poor old drunken Lot gets into at the hands of his daughters perhaps does. As with the sins of Sodom, sexual taboo is acknowledged but seems not to be a major source of anxiety or horrified excitement for this poet; he is reflecting a society and set of social mores in which men getting led astray by wine and women is as much of a problem, perhaps more of one. The passage finds a striking echo in the Old English verse riddle on Lot:

A man sat at wine with his two wives and his two sons and his two daughters, loving sisters, and their two sons; the father of those princes was there and the uncle and nephew. In all there were five noblemen and ladies sitting there.

Here too the incestuous aspect is clear enough: the riddle by which the apparent twelve people become five is only explained by the knowledge that the 'wives' are also his daughters, and his sons also

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31 eode seo yldre to . . heora bega fæder . . . fæmman to bryde him bu wærón . eaforan brohtan willgeswostor on woruld sunu heora ealdan fæder. Para ædelinga modor oséorne Moab nemde, Lothes dohter. (ll.2600-9)

32 Wer sæt at wine mid his wifum twarn ond his twegen suno ond his twa dohtor, swase gesweostor, ond hyra suno twegen, freolico frumbearn; fæder wæs þær inne para ædelinga æghwæðres mid. eam ond nefa. Ealra wærón fife eorla ond idesa insittendra.

their sons, so that each of the sons is uncle to the other. But there seems no sense of shame or horror about it, only a celebration of complexity and oddity. An incident which might seem strange or troubling to us becomes simply an occasion for a witty literary tour-de-force, finding its appropriate place within a riddle collection often given to jokes about sexuality and preserved in a manuscript owned by the bishop of Exeter.

The Genesis poet’s view of the incest episode finds interesting parallels in his treatment of the Flood. Paraphrasing Genesis 6:2 on the sons of God and the daughters of men, the poet explains that Seth’s descendants angered God by choosing wives from among Cain’s descendants, ‘that accursed race’. God himself then speaks, presenting that union as the work of female beauty leagued with the devil: ‘the beauty of women, the appearance of ladies and the eternal enemy have malevolently overcome the nation of men [the word wera means specifically males] who were formerly at peace’, he says. For God this is very much a gender war, another fall of men brought about by women with the help of the devil, just like Eden, and it serves as a kind of founding myth of heterosexual desire and its destructiveness. The poet goes on: ‘after 120 years vengeance struck those doomed nations when God decided to punish those oath-breakers and destroy the giants, those great evil-doers’. The subsequent references to sins are general and there is nothing to suggest that they are sexual misdemeanours, but we are apparently invited to read the Flood both as revenge for the original miscegenation and as punishment for the sins of the descendants of that miscegenation. What angers God in the first place is the working of heterosexual desire between men and women, with men apparently seen as the women’s victims. For this poet, that kind of sexuality, seen both here and in the fall of Adam, and perhaps in the incest of Lot, seems to be more threatening, at least to men, than the homosexual desires manifested by the Sodomites’ interest in the angels. Willing though the poet is to find myths of origin in Genesis, in the story of Cain and Abel for instance, he evidently finds no temptation to read the Sodom story as the founding myth of sexual depravity; its associations are rather with the more general archetypes of urban excess (like the cities in the associated poem on Daniel).

33 baer wite onwod grome,  
idesa ansien, and ece feond  
folcdrïht wera, ba ær on friðe wæron. (l.1260-2)

34 Siðman hundtwelftig geteled rime  
wintra on wúrwulde wæace bisgodan  
fæge þeoda, hwonne frea wolde  
on wærlægan wite settan  
and on deåd slæan ðædum scylldige  
gigantmæcgas, gode unleofe,  
micle manscedan. (l.1263-9)
The stories of homosexuality in Sodom, fornication before the Flood, and incest in the cave were of course to be repeatedly rewritten by later medieval authors. There is space to consider only two, the first of whom is Gower. Gower has nothing to say about Sodom in the *Confessio Amantis* and the one striking story he tells of homosexual desire is the delightful classical legend of the innocent love which grows up naturally between the two young girls Iphis and Iante and is converted by the gods into a more convenient heterosexual union. But Gower does have a brief and puzzling account of Lot's incest. He starts book eight, which is devoted to the sin of incest, by explaining that in the first age, to the time of Abraham, incest between brother and sister was necessary and permitted, but then, when there were enough people, the rule changed to permit only the marriage of cousins, and that continued until Christian times when all marriage to kindred was forbidden by the pope. Genius then gives some examples of wrongful incest: Caligula and his sisters; the Old Testament Amon and his sister; Lot and his daughters; and then the Apollonius story, which is partly about father–daughter incest. As so often in Gower one is struck by the way Genius ignores the original narrative context, and in this case the commentary context too. He presents the incest as Lot's own act, implicitly responding to his wife's inconvenient transformation into a pillar of salt:

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Whan Lothes wif was overgon
And schape into the salte ston . . .
Be bothe his dowhtres thanne he lay,
With childe [he] made hem bothe grete. (viii, 226–31)
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There is no reference to the daughters' initiative or the drink, or the wish to repopulate the world; indeed the latter justification has implicitly been forestalled by the earlier remarks about the end of the first age. Genius's supposed purpose is to show that those who commit incest are punished by subsequent events, but all he can offer in the case of Lot is the dubious argument that the Moabites and Ammonites who descended from the incestuous unions often harmed the people of God in subsequent ages. Just as the weakness of the argument subverts his own moral purpose, so his presentation of Lot as a notorious libertine seems deliberately to ignore the array of justifying aspects present in Genesis and the long tradition of exculpatory Christian exegesis. Gower can hardly have expected his readers to be unaware of the context in which the Lot story was normally read and explained away; there is a curious provocativeness in inviting us to rethink the story and then to

register its consequent denial of ordinary morality. Genius's recasting of the story, and oddly lame attempt to foist on it an acceptable morality, is a pointed reminder to Gower's readers of how much cultures depend on the work that story-tellers and commentators do to resignify a narrative.

The other late example is the poem *Cleanness*. Here the Flood and the destruction of Sodom are two of the three Old Testament events on which the poem concentrates, the third being Belshazzar's feast. But whereas for Alcuin and Ælfric the Flood and Sodom had been polarized opposites, representing heterosexual and homosexual vice respectively, in *Cleanness* they seem curiously parallel. In his account of Sodom the poet sets up an extreme contrast between the homosexual and the heterosexual. Homosexuality is the prevailing sin of the Sodomites, which angers God and brings about their destruction. God himself describes homosexuality as the worst of all faults, men taking men as mates and coupling foolishly in the manner of women; it is an unclean usage in which they scorn nature. Heterosexual desires and practices on the other hand, God tells Abraham, are a natural thing, the sweetest of all gifts, the merriest of manners, a source of mirth greater than Paradise:

\[\text{Pay han lerned a lyst pat lyke3 me ille,}\]
\[\text{Pat pay han founden in her flesch of faute3 pe werst;}\]
\[\text{Vch male mat3 his mach a man as hymseluen.}\]
\[\text{And fyler folvy in fere on femmale3 wyse.}\]
\[\text{I compast hem a kynde crafte and kende hit hem derne,}\]
\[\text{And amed hit in myn ordenaunce oddely dere.}\]
\[\text{And dy3t drawy herinne, doole alper-sweetest;}\]
\[\text{And pe play of paramore3 I portrayed myseluen,}\]
\[\text{And made perto a maner myriest of o3per.}\]
\[\text{When two true togeder had ty3ed hemseluen.}\]
\[\text{Bytweene a male and his make such merpe schulde come,}\]
\[\text{Wel-nwy3e pure parady3s mo3t preue no better.}\]
\[\text{Elle3 pay mo3t honestly ay3per o3per welde,}\]
\[\text{At a styrle stollen steuen vnstered wyth sy3t.}\]
\[\text{Luf-lowe hem bytweene lasched so hote}\]
\[\text{Pat alle pe meschefe3 on mold mo3t hit not sleke.}\]
\[\text{Now haf pay skyfted my skyl and scorned natwre}\]
\[\text{And hentte3 hem in he3pyng an vsage vnclene.}\]

God's language does little to distinguish between licit and illicit heterosexuality: he claims credit for inventing the play of paramours. It is a quite remarkable and provocative divine apologia for romantic love, as a blazing passion that nothing can shake.

That sharp and provocative distinction between two kinds of sexuality seems to be dramatized in Lot's offer of his daughters.

Though the Sodomites describe what they propose to do with the angels as love, the narrator speaks of it with the utmost loathing and contempt. So too does Lot — you defile yourselves, he says. He offers to teach them a craft that is better according to nature, by giving them his two daughters to play with as they like:

Bot I schal kenne yow by kynde a crafte bat is better;
I haf a tresor in my telde of tow my fayre dester,
bat ar maydenes vnmaid for alle men sette;
In Sodamas, bat I hit say, non semloker burdes.
Hit ar ronk, hit ar rype, and redy to manne;
To samen wyth bo semly be solace is better;
I schal biteche you bo two bat tayt arn and quoynt,
And layke3 wyth hem as you lyst, and letes my gestes one.

(ll. 865–72)

It is a strange and troubling speech, as if whatever the Sodomites did to the daughters could only be good and pleasant (the solace is better, says Lot), on the grounds that it is heterosexual and therefore natural, while whatever the Sodomites otherwise do can only be horrible and filthy because homosexual. Yet the references to the girls’ beauty and virginity, the frank invitation to mar the hitherto unmarred, the presentation of them as ripe for plucking, all seem cruelly to emphasize the horror of what is proposed by Lot. The editors Andrew and Waldron remark that we are not of course meant to find Lot wholly admirable at this point, but it is hard to be sure; he seems only to be developing and acting upon the distinctions made by God and the narrator. It is striking too that both God’s speech and Lot’s rely on the idea of the natural and more especially the pleasure-principle as a justification for the heterosexual way of love, rather than stressing the importance of procreation, which had been the standard justification for many commentators. It is perhaps significant that the poet does not deal with the incest story, which for others had been the test-case for the justification of sexuality by the needs of procreation. If pleasure and mirth are the purpose of a God-given sexuality, and if the beauty and purity of Lot’s daughters are what justify them in Lot’s eyes as sexual objects, it becomes hard to say what is so damnable in the Sodomites’ expectations of pleasure with the beautiful angels.

The problems raised by the poet’s treatment of the Sodom story come out more clearly if one looks at the Flood episode. His account of the sins which preceded and caused the Flood is deeply puzzling, using a language similar to that used later of the sins of Sodom and continually hinting at some kind of depraved sexuality without quite defining it. It is called filth, it is against nature, and they practice it against and with each other:

And þenne founden þay fylþe in fleschlych dedeȝ,
And controued agayn kynde contrare werkeȝ,
And vshed hem vnbryftyly vchon on oþer,
And als with oþer, wylfþfully, upon a wrange wyse.
(ll.265–8)

The point may only be that these people were supposedly governed by the law of nature and therefore any sin which they practise would be against nature, but it is not a convincing argument. It is worth noting that Cursor Mundi identifies sexual sins as the cause of the Flood – adultery and rape, specifically – and that one of the four manuscripts has some additional lines mentioning homosexuality too:

| Wymmen as we hit fynde |
| Went togider ageynes kynde, |
| And men also þe same wise |
| As þe deuyl wolde deuyse. |

(This is in fact the only example I have so far come across in the retelling of Genesis where female homosexuality is mentioned.) The Cleanness poet is perhaps alluding to a tradition of this kind, that sexual depravity was what prompted the Flood. For all this culminates in an extreme act of sexual perversion and miscegenation, involving yet another interpretation of the verse from Genesis 6 on the sons of God and the daughters of men: people became so foul in their flesh, says the poet, that, paradoxically, the devils perceived that the women were beautiful and coupled with them in the manner of humans, engendering giants on them:

| So ferly fowled her flesch þat þe fende loked |
| How þe deȝter of þe douȝe wern derelyc høyre, |
| And fallen in felaschyp with hem on folken wyse, |
| And engendered on hem ieaunteȝ with her japeȝ ille. |

(ll.269–72)

As a result, evil grew apace and God became angry. Thus women and heterosexual desire become identified with the filthy and unnatural fleshly sin which causes the Flood. The paradoxical lines 269–70 – their flesh became so foul that the fiends noticed how preciously fair were the daughters of noble mankind – seem deliberately to underline the poem’s ambivalence about sexual attraction, where foul and fair come together. It reminds one of the way in which, in the same poet’s romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the apparent polarization of beautiful young woman and ugly old one proves so deceptive. One should note too that in the

third great story of God’s anger and punishment in the poem, Belshazzar’s feast, there is much emphasis on the concubines and lemmans as an element in the corruption and defilement of the court. God’s, and Lot’s, easy polarization of filthy homosexuality and beautiful heterosexuality comes to seem increasingly troubling and oversimplified.

The medieval English versions of the Sodom story dramatize a number of important topics, including the problems of intention, consciousness, activeness and guilt in sexual matters. If the vices of Sodom itself gave free rein to imaginations willing to be appalled, the incest of Lot required some subtle arguments about intention and act, activeness and passivity. The most striking feature is the tendency to use the narrative, along with the story of the Flood, to articulate the problematic nature of sexuality by positing two extremes. The early poem *Genesis A* freely acknowledges the ‘illicit’ nature of sexuality in Sodom and the cave but seems untroubled by that aspect and represents female heterosexual desire as the greater threat to male society. Most of the narratives and commentaries, however, set up a contrast between the unnatural and unspeakable mode of homosexuality, which is identified with Sodom, and the natural, pardonable, procreative mode of the heterosexual, which can be accepted and approved even in its tabooed form in the case of Lot’s incest and even when it aroused the anger of God and the destruction of the world in the case of the Flood. *Cleanness* takes these tendencies further than any of the texts we have looked at, with its scathing denunciation of Sodom and its extravagant idealization of heterosexual joy and game but that very polarization seems to be undermined both by its extravagance and by the negative way heterosexual desire is presented in the story of the Flood and Belshazzar’s feast. The felt need to posit ‘good’ and ‘bad’ kinds of sexuality, for which the Sodom story was enlisted, faced complications when explored too energetically.

The other general point that strikes one about these retellings is the ambivalence about the female role in the story. The original narrative shows a troubling lack of concern for the daughters of Lot when they are offered to the Sodomites for sexual play and presents them as the sexually controlling actors in the incest with Lot. For the poet of *Genesis A* there is an evident acknowledgement of female subjecthood, in the awareness that women are a part of the society of Sodom and the readiness to see them as implicated in both the sins and the punishment, and again in the full acceptance of the daughters’ active role and Lot’s passivity in the incest episode, but it clearly carries with it a perception of women not as victims but as active and dangerous figures, fully responsible for the desires that subvert male society, in Eden, at the Flood and in Lot’s cave. In most commentary and narrative, however, occasional defence of the
daughters tends to go alongside a pervasive blindness to female subjecthood, most strikingly marked in the *Visio Pauli*. Alcuin is anxious to defend the daughters for their role in the incest, as misguided but well-intentioned, but finds nothing to comment on in Lot’s offer of them to the Sodomites, and in his emphasis on male homosexuality as the sin of Sodom and the cause of its destruction is curiously unthinking of the implications for the women of Sodom. Ælfric too, though he refuses to consider the sin of Sodom in detail, evidently thinks of sexual vice as male: before the Flood men sinned with women, at Sodom they sinned with men. As with Alcuin, his defence of heterosexual activity as a natural act and a much lesser offence can be seen to make a space for women (given his apparent assumption that homosexuality is a male vice), but he views it mainly from the male perspective and he seems to find nothing troubling in the offering of Lot’s daughters or in the fate of the women of Sodom. While the commentator on the Old English Hexateuch is at pains to defend the daughters for their part in the incest, and to blame Lot, the defence depends on asserting their subordinate status in the interests of patriarchy; they are blameless because it was for their father to protect and inform them. In *Cleanness* too, though the wording of Lot’s offer of his daughters captures the horror of their position it does not quite invite us to sympathize with them rather than Lot; the poem depicts the crimes of Sodom as male vices and celebrates by contrast a sexuality that is shared with women, but it is after all the foul fairness of women, inviting the attentions of devils, that seems to initiate a very similar sexual depravity before the Flood.