



Sodom

by Louis Godbout

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Sodom is a city mentioned in the Bible as having been destroyed by God in a rain of brimstone and fire for the "sin" of its inhabitants, traditionally thought to have been male homosexual intercourse. The name has hence given rise to the words sodomy and sodomite.

Sodom is one of the five "cities of the plain" or *Pentapolis* believed to have been located somewhere near the Dead Sea, the others being Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar (or Bela), all of which suffered the same cataclysmic fate save for the last. Of these only Gomorrah is as notorious as Sodom, the two being commonly linked in the biblical phrase "Sodom and Gomorrah." In modern times Gomorrah came to be associated with female homosexuality though there is no basis in scripture for this.

The main biblical passage concerning Sodom, Genesis 19, revolves around Lot, a nephew of the patriarch Abraham, who had established himself in the city.

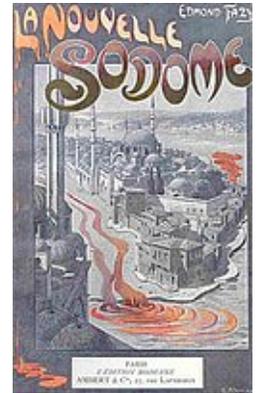
Lot welcomes to his house two angels, but he is confronted by the other inhabitants who use violence in their desire to "know" them, a word sometimes used in the Bible to imply carnal knowledge. The angels fend off the assailants by blinding them and advise Lot to flee Sodom with his family. In spite of their injunction never to look back as they escape the flame-engulfed city, Lot's wife does so and is changed to a pillar of salt. The tale concludes with Lot's daughters intoxicating their father with wine in order to "lie with him" and secure his progeny.

The story is thus broadly similar to the many myths detailing the annihilation of a wicked humanity by a wrathful god (or gods) that are common not only in the lore of the Mediterranean basin (the epic of Gilgamesh, the story of Noah, the Greek myth of Deukalion and Pyrrha), but also in Asian cultures. Yet it is unique in that the evil of the people of Sodom was interpreted in the Judeo-Christian tradition as being specifically their indulgence in sexual activity between males.

From Medieval Christian writers such as Peter Cantor to Renaissance preachers such as Bernardino of Siena to many contemporary television evangelists such as Pat Robertson, Sodom's fate has been used rhetorically to warn of impending doom for those who tolerate homosexuality in their midst and to justify the harshest punishments, such as death by fire, for those who practice it.

In the last fifty years, several historians, notably Derrick Sherwin Bailey and John Boswell, have tried to show, based partly on biblical references to Sodom other than that in Genesis and partly on seemingly more open attitudes towards homosexuality in the primitive Church, that the "sin" of its inhabitants was not originally interpreted as homosexuality, but rather as a lack of hospitality, a duty considered of the utmost importance in the Ancient world.

As pointed out by Michael Pettinger, these revisionist theories, however valid, often betray in those who



Edmond Fazy's *Nouvelle Sodome* (1907) is one of many literary productions that use allusions to Sodom to depict homosexuals as tainted or doomed.
Courtesy Louis Godbout.

propose them "a desire for a return to a mythical, perhaps purely fictional Christian Golden Age, one in which the Church will embrace them once again, just as it supposedly did in its earliest days" Not surprisingly, these theories have been widely disseminated and have found a wide appeal among gay people today.

Though based on serious scholarship, these are not the first attempts to reinterpret the Sodom story. For however large may be the corpus of homophobic social and cultural productions it engendered--theological condemnations, vociferous sermons, horrific paintings, chilling morality plays, draconian legal interdicts and punishments--there also exists a small number of libertine productions that attempt to criticize rationally or ridicule the myth of Sodom in order to excuse and even to extol same-sex love.

One of the first to do so is the Venetian "carnival" dialogue *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (1652; only recently translated as *Alcibiades the Schoolboy*, 2000) in which the Sodom story is explained as a morality tale invented by the leaders of the Hebrew people, who in their walk through the desert have come upon lakes of asphalt. They are told that these are the remnants of Sodom, the rationale being to prevent the men from preferring boys to the women who have grown ugly from their harsh travels, as a consequence of which the population might wane.

Tongue-in-cheek retellings and burlesque exegeses of the Sodom story continued during the seventeenth century in plays such as *Sodom or the Quintessence of Debauchery* (1684), attributed to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. These retellings became extremely common in French *livres philosophiques* (that is, erotic, bawdy, and anti-clerical books) of the eighteenth century.

The most famous of all such works, *Histoire de Dom Bougre, Portier des Chartreux* (1741), contains a particularly funny scene in which the biblical story is denounced as slander and homosexuality is fiercely defended as having been gloriously practiced by great men of all times.

The expression *enfants de Sodome* or children of Sodom appears in this novel to denote homosexuals. It also appears in song and verse (for example, *Le Recueil du Cosmopolite*, 1735), as well as in *Les Enfants de Sodome à l'Assemblée Nationale* (1790; *The Children of Sodom at the National Assembly*), the title of one of a series of hilarious pamphlets of the French Revolution demanding what we might anachronistically call "gay rights" (including access to doctors for *la cristalline*, a venereal disease common in homosexuals of the time). This work retells once again the story of the burning of Sodom, this time explaining it as due to a careless cook who was too busy bugging his helper to notice that the fire in his kitchen was out of control.

Many other works of the eighteenth century facetiously claim on their title pages to have been printed at *Sodome* or *Medoso* (an anagram), notably the *Anecdotes pour servir à l'histoire secrète des Ebugors* (1733; *Anecdotes to Be Used for the Secret History of the Buggers*), in which the buggers in question are depicted as a race of people at war with female prostitutes, a common theme in erotic literature.

This jocular vein was also adopted by such famous writers as Voltaire (in, among other works, *La Bible enfin expliquée* [*The Bible Finally Explained*, 1776] and "Asphalte" [1770], which was later included in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*) and continued until the twentieth century, with such works as Tristan Bernard's operetta *La petite femme de Loth* (performed in 1900, printed in 1901).

However, many more serious literary productions used allusions to Sodom to depict homosexuals as a tainted or doomed "race," including novels such as Henri d'Argis' *Sodome* (1888), Edmond Fazy's *La nouvelle Sodome* (1907), and--most famous of all--Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu: Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1921-1922).

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About the Author

Louis Godbout is a collector and amateur historian. He is a longtime member of the Archives gaies du Québec and has participated in the preparation of several exhibits in Montreal. He has also produced three multi-media lectures that reflect his varied interests: *Beaux enfants de Sodome*, on eighteenth-century sodomitical imagery; *Ébauches et débauches*, on gay French literature from 1859 to 1939; and *Le rideau rose*, on French gay and lesbian theater before 1969.