

## Sodom, Leviticus and Abominations

Sometimes in theological discussions, scholars, ministers and lay people merely repeat uncritically what someone else has said,<sup>1</sup> without exploring whether it is true or not. I was brought up to believe that homosexuality was morally and spiritual wrong, and against the order established by God for human beings. I now believe this view to be ill-informed and incorrect. I believe that too many New Church people merely repeated the same mistaken interpretations of the story of Sodom, a couple of verses in the book of Leviticus and the topic of Abominations. One of the differences between New Church authors is whether they read the Bible from the outside-in, such as Revds Heinrichs (1993), Jarvis (2013), Heinrichs (2015), Nemitz (2015), and Buss (2015) or from the inside-out, that is, do they interpret the literal sense or plain meaning of Scripture without its inner meaning, or do they allow the internal meaning to dictate how the surface meaning is understood? Another difference between different schools of New Church thought regarding morality, is whether human behaviour is judged from the outside-in or behaviour, or the inside-out or motives. It is the latter way that is angelic.<sup>2</sup> New Church morality is based on ends or motivation: “evil spirits stir up falsities and evils, but angels excuse them, if the person’s end in view has been good, and instil truths.”<sup>3</sup> as is the Lord’s way. (SE 1644; TCR 650) Angels “if possible endeavour with that person to correct them”. (AC 1079:1e) Circumstances extenuate. (SE 3537) Also another difference of opinion is caused by taking or not taking into account a person’s ruling love or prime motivation: “for good people the peripheral evil is mitigated by the central goodness. This is why evil deeds do not damn people who have been regenerated”. (DP 86 [Dole]; cf. AC 164) Why do so some Swedenborgians dismiss a homosexual person’s genuine kindness and self-sacrificial love, just because they are homosexual? Whatever view of homosexuality we hold, we need to remember that the Lord is never willing to violently crush our childhood beliefs but bends gently, “kindly” and “gradually” over more than a life-time,<sup>4</sup> “unless it is contrary to order itself”. (AC 2180:5) In our treatment of people whatever their sexual orientation, we need to be gentle with them and not “violently crush” their beliefs.

Other differences of opinion are caused by different people weighing evidence differently. This will become apparent when we look at the story of Sodom, a couple of verses in Leviticus and the topic of abominations. But another factor that needs to be taken into account is that heaven regards people from their charity and faith. (AC 1258) Swedenborg writes: “nobody is able to enter heaven unless he possesses a measure of innocence, Mark 10:15.”<sup>5</sup> How important is innocence in relation to teachings about Sodom, men lying with men or abominable behaviour?

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<sup>1</sup> Swedenborg calls this “historical faith”. (FA 1; AR 838; 5M6; AE 232:1; 242:5; 250:9; 349:12; 401:35; 427:5; 759:4; 769:2; 781:8; 787:5; 789:8-9; 815:4; 832:3; 895:2e; CH 198; LJ(P) 202; SE 5945)

<sup>2</sup> AC 2335:2-3; 2349:4; 5068; 8911; HH 475 n. c; SE 2451-2452, 2359

<sup>3</sup> AC 7122:2; cf. AC 1088:2; 3489:1; CL 453e; 527:3; 530; TCR 523; SE 1675; 3873; AC 6559:2e; 8131

<sup>4</sup> AC 1992:4; cf. AE 409:2; AC 561e; 2053:2; 3854:3e

<sup>5</sup> AC 2780; 3519:6; 3994:2; 4797:2e; 5236:3; 5608:4-5; CL 414; HH 281; 341

## Sodom

“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; <sup>5</sup>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.’ <sup>6</sup>Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup>and said, ‘I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup> 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.’” (Genesis 19:4-8 [NRSV])

I believe that traditionalists read homosexuality into the story of Sodom. I would argue that they read the views of the first century Jewish philosophers, Philo and Josephus into the story, that is, they interpret Philo and Josephus and not the Word. I believe that Revd Willard L. D. Heinrichs ((2015) 182-183) and Revd Kurt Nemitz ((2015) 185, 188) fall into this trap. For example Philo says that the men of Sodom “lusted after one another, doing unseemly things, and not regarding to respecting their common nature”, and Josephus says they “abused themselves with sodomy”, which could be read as “and turned to their own advantage associations with other men”. (Fortson and Grams (2016) 212, 214) If traditionalists interpreting the Bible through Philo and Josephus, how should we understand the story of Sodom? I think there are three possible interpretations of the Sodom story: attempted rape by a homosexual mob or attempted rape by a bisexual mob or attempted rape by a heterosexual mob.

My preferred option is the last one following Michael Carden (1999a, 1999b): heterosexual men attempting to sexually assault other males through anal rape. This crime is so taboo, even in our society, it would easily fit into categories of “impermissible”, “unmentionable” or “forbidden”. I have read it was prevalent at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq following the Gulf War and in the Balkan War, and barely rates a mention in the Western Press. If you want to believe that they are homosexual, then you would have to justify it. There seems to be an assumption that anything that does not involve penile-vaginal intercourse is not heterosexual, but homosexual. Social scientists would claim that anal intercourse is more prevalent amongst heterosexuals, than amongst bisexuals and homosexuals. The majority of the last group seems to prefer inter-crural sex like the ancient Greeks. Does non-penetrative sex amongst homosexuals break the commandments of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Whether anal intercourse is “intrinsically disgusting” or “total unnatural” is open to debate. Personally I’ve never indulged in it, nor am interested in it, so for me I suppose it is “irrelevant” and “unnecessary”.

Revd Kurt Nemitz (2015) distinguishes between natural or heterosexual intercourse and “unnatural sexual conjunctions”, or any sexual act outside heterosexual marriage. (185) Referring to Genesis 19 he builds his case on homosexuality being “a certain kind of foul behaviour that is totally unnatural”. (AC 2322) Swedenborg never explicitly links homosexuality with this “foul behaviour”. <sup>6</sup> Rape however is “a certain kind of foul behaviour that is totally unnatural”. Sexually violating others is

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<sup>6</sup> A point made by Revd John D. Odhner (1994) “Worst Adultery: Many Shades of Gray” *New Church Life* (1994) 454-464, 455

one of the conditions that is “most destructive” to the love of marriage.<sup>7</sup> In a patriarchal society it is unnatural, for a man to be the passive or receptive partner, as it is for the woman to be the active partner. The traditionalist case of being anti-homosexuality also relies on Romans 1:26-27, but in the first three centuries of the church, Romans 1:26 was not interpreted as lesbian behaviour but “noncoital or non-procreative forms of *heterosexual* intercourse.” (Brownson (2013) 225) Brownson argues that unnatural for Paul was also against “one’s individual nature or disposition”, and “thus reflects the ancient notion that same-sex eroticism was driven by an insatiable thirst for the exotic by those who were not content with ‘unnatural’ desires for the same sex.” Also it referred to social convention regarding males and females, and also non-procreative sexual acts.

But “unnatural” can refer to the motives and sexual acts of heterosexuals in the Writings. Swedenborg talks of a promiscuous, lascivious heterosexual man who developed “an unnatural nature”, which meant he “had annihilated the desire for marriage, and even the desire to beget children.”<sup>8</sup> In MA 121 [Chadwick] Swedenborg continues “they have destroyed everything human, because they have destroyed everything of heaven, which is based upon conjugal love.” MA 122 continues: “It is clear that they cannot be in heaven, for just as they are against the love of marriage, so they are against affections for good and truth, from which heaven arose.” I’ve read of many homosexual couples who desire marriage and children. I would argue that “unnatural-ness” comes from within not from without. (cf. AC 9110; TCR 672) Consequently “unnatural” people can be those who mistreat their children or their enemies, or who couldn’t care less about other people or who are hypocrites. (TCR 488; SE 4367, 4369)

What is the story of Sodom about in the spiritual sense? Lot, having separated from Abraham or the influence of heaven on our everyday consciousness, (AC 1545; 1572; 1707; 2034:6) represents us when we are superficial Christians, who over-rely on rituals and traditions, but mean well and seek to serve our family and friends. (cf. AC 2324) But Sodom means “the evil, especially those inside the Church” (AC 2317; 2322; 2324:2), and so because we need to be in control and protect what has always been, we can be insensitive and unkind, (AC 2322) and this can spiral downwards into seeking to dominate other people. It is a picture of us when we experience a time of judgement or crisis, when we have to choose between being kind and compassionate or having ideas about loving our neighbour, (Lot) (AC 2456) or being self-centred and self-indulgent (the people of Sodom). One way of reacting against being kind, because it doesn’t agree with our rigid, literal interpretation of the Word, (AC 6775) or it challenges our “different teaching and a different life”. (AC 2368)

Whenever we stray from the heavenly marriage of good and truth, or when our hearts and minds are not correctly balanced, we are in danger of projecting a symbolic picture representing our motives and goals. If we believe that the Holy Supper takes away sin and yet commit sin, we commit adultery with an aunt. (SE 5979; MA 83) If we don’t practise or apply what we believe, we are seen as committing adultery with our mother (AE 237:9; 736; 817:5; 1006:2; MA 73; cf. SE 4967) or our mother-in-law. (AE 237:9; 817:5; 1006:2) If we go to church but don’t allow the church

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<sup>7</sup> CL 459:6; 501; 511-513

<sup>8</sup> AC 2746 [Elliott]; SE 1663-1665; MA 121-122

service to change our attitude to sins, we are pictured as committing adultery with a sibling. (MA 85; SE 5961; 6096:20) If we only look after our own children and grandchildren, and not anybody else's, commit adultery with a mother and father. (SE 4855a) If we hate and persecute others except for our relatives and friends, we commit adultery with a sister. (SE 4856) "They who wish to kill all, and are bloodthirsty, nor are ever touched with any compassion, and are proud in the highest degree – these copulate with swine; others with other brutes." (SE 4857) "Those who have been in faith alone, or in no doctrine, but merely knew something of the sense of the letter of the Word, cast down a sphere of abominable adultery with an aunt, and with a daughter-in-law; which adultery is from the lowest hell, with which they have a communication." (SE 5929e; 5939)

I believe that the story of Sodom is talking about times when we are so convinced we are right, that we go to any lengths, often cruelly and callously, dominating and abusing others through any argument, any explanation and any justification, using every tactic to humiliate, undermine and devalue what the other person is saying or how they feel. I believe this is the spiritual sense of sodomy. It fits in nicely with the connection Swedenborg makes between sodomy and "love of dominion" or "love of ruling"<sup>9</sup> and the "Sodomitic hells". (AE 1006:2) I would argue that Rudberg was more likely to be heterosexual than homosexual. (SE 4826) The love of dominating other people doesn't necessarily result in homosexuality. (Heinrichs (1993) 402)

I mentioned above the people of Sodom are members of the church. It needs to be also remembered that whenever we "reject or deny" "the truths and goods of the church", we "do worse things than those of Sodom. (AE 653:9 on Matthew 11:23, 24; 10:14, 15; Mark 6:11; Luke 10:10-13) Christians, who want to be rewarded for every good deed they do, who follow the commandments "at the same time with a view to heaven, are utterly damned, and that it is better for Sodom and Gomorrah than for them." (SE 6068) Heretical, enthusiastic Christians who practise ritual wife-sharing "are not far from Sodomites", (SE 1977) or "their sexual intercourse is far more abominable than that of the Sodomites." (SE 3768:2; cf. SE 3796)

In concluding this section, I would argue that the story of Sodom is not about homosexuals, but about times when we lose touch with the Divine, over-rely on our religious knowledge or customs, spiral down into being unkind, dogmatic and uncaring, until we eventually mercilessly dominate other people.

### Leviticus

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."  
(Leviticus 18:22)

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." (Leviticus 20:13)

The Bible and the Writings were written within societies that were patriarchal. (AC 266; 568:2e) Vines (2014) gives a few examples of the sexist, misogynistic Old

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<sup>9</sup> AC 1212; AR 502; AE 485; 1006:2; MA 86; SE 5939e; 6096:29

Testament: male slaves freed after 6 years, while female slaves never freed (Leviticus 27:1-8); females “are not allowed to inherit property if they have a living male sibling (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17). The Old Testament applies the death penalty to women who engage in premarital sex, but it doesn’t [92] penalize men who do the same (see Deuteronomy 22:13-21). And men are granted the exclusive right to initiate divorce (see Deuteronomy 22:13-29; 24:1-4).” (91-92)

Why should I understand Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 literally? There is very little in the Bible that New Church people take literally: “interior truths are rarely visible in the literal sense of the Old Testament Word”. (AC 3373:2) How do I know that these verses of the literal sense that weren’t “for the people and peoples of that period”, (AC 2609:1; cf. AC 8912) or were Israelite customs (AC 10453:3; 10461) like a rapist marrying his victim after the paying of a fine (Deuteronomy 22:28-29), which could be regarded as a bad law (Ezekiel 20:25), especially for the woman who was raped? How do I know whether Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 have been abrogated, or laws we practise if we want to or whether they “must be altogether observed and carried out”? (AC 9349:3) Philo interpreted Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 to mean that the active partner was “a guide and teacher of those greatest of all evils unmanliness and ... effeminacy”. Some might argue that the greatest evils today are murder, rape, ethnic or religious cleansing, terrorism, incest and genocide. Maybe Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 has been mistranslated? An orthodox, homosexual Rabbi interpreted these Leviticus verses to refer to rape based on the similarity of language used in the story of the rape of Dinah.<sup>10</sup> The literal sense of Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 depends on the internal sense, because that’s where the “genuine truth” is.<sup>11</sup> The Word is written for the sake of the internal sense not for the literal sense.<sup>12</sup>

As I wrote earlier, angels judge actions from their motives. If a loving couple indulge in anal intercourse, whether they’re homosexual or heterosexual or whatever, then we should start from their aims and intentions, not their actions. Whether anal intercourse is a sin or not, if the ruling love or primary focus in the life of the partners involved is loving and heavenly, then it is far more important for their eternal welfare and well-being, than their actions. (DP 86; cf. AC 164) Whatever a sexual orientation a person is in, what goes on in their hearts and minds, that is, their spirituality, is far more important in determining their eternal abode, than what they get up to in their bedroom.

### Abominations

Revd Nemitz (2015) claims that non-heterosexual sexual acts are abominations, based on Mark 10:6-9; Leviticus 18:22, 30; Genesis 19. Swedenborg says they are abominations because they correspond to or spring “from the marriage of evil and falsity”.<sup>13</sup> Adulterous actions “are intrinsically disgusting” (AC 8904:12) because of the motives of the people involved, not because of what they are doing physically or

<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, Rabbi Steven (2004) *Wrestling with God and men: homosexuality in the Jewish tradition* (Madison, Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press.) 205-206

<sup>11</sup> AC 9030; 258:1; 10400:3; 10402:4; SS 4; HD 254

<sup>12</sup> AC 2574; 2959:3; 4756; 4968; 6306:7e; 6963; 7194; 7225:3; AE 140:5; LD 52; for example, hired servants (AC 8002:4); unintentional murder (AC 9011:4)

<sup>13</sup> AC 8904:12; cf. AC 3399:1e; 4989:1; 10648:2-3; HH 384e; AE 817:4

sexually, since the bio-mechanics of having heterosexual adultery don't differ from the bio-mechanics of a heterosexual married couple having sexual intercourse, unless rape, or violence or lack of consent, or incest, or other factors come into play, but their internal motives do: "the difference between them is such as that between heaven and hell." (AE 981:3; cf. 990:2) In SE 6110:25 Swedenborg says "the ultimates of each appear similar, as to their delights, but yet they are not". Similarly, the anal intercourse of a heterosexual married couple doesn't differ substantially from that of a homosexual couple or a non-married heterosexual couple. Virtues such as holiness<sup>14</sup> or "goods and truths"<sup>15</sup> or "innocence"<sup>16</sup> continually come from the Lord and flow into us, as does the Being that is celestial and spiritual love.<sup>17</sup>

What makes adultery adultery? The glib answer is "the marriage of evil and falsity".<sup>18</sup> Is sodomy as implied by Leviticus 18 really adultery?<sup>19</sup> I would suggest only if the people concerned are in this "infernal marriage". These passages apply equally to heterosexuals like you and me, as homosexual church members. What if a faithful homosexual couple don't indulge in sodomy? What if a heterosexual New Church couple indulge in anal intercourse? To go deeper into this topic we need to realise that the programming to be selfish, insensitive and unkind we receive from our parents are ultimately caused by the abuse and misuse of their hearts and minds. We are not immune from the effects of the infernal marriage because we are heterosexuals!:

"The hereditary evils into which a man is born are not from Adam because he ate of the tree of knowledge, but from parents through the adulteration of good and the falsification of truth; thus, through the marriage of evil and falsity, from which the love of adultery exists. The ruling love of the parents is carried over and transmitted into the offspring and becomes part of their nature. If the love of the parents is that of adultery, it is also the love of evil for falsity, and of falsity for evil. From this origin man derives all evil, and through evil he is subject to hell. From these things it is evident that, through adulteries, a man is subject to hell, unless he is reformed of the Lord by means of truths, and by a life according to them. Nor can anyone be reformed unless he shuns adultery as infernal and loves marriage as heavenly. Thus, and in no other way, is hereditary evil broken, and rendered milder in the offspring." (AE 989:2)

When Swedenborg explains adultery, he writes that "adulterous actions are intrinsically disgusting and called abominations; that is to say, they are such because they correspond to the marriage of evil and falsity, which is the hellish marriage. ... But adulterous love springs from the marriage of falsity and evil, and so from hell, that is, from the devil."<sup>20</sup> Adultery is thus judged from motives. What motivates a person to be selfish, insensitive, unfaithful and unkind to their partner? People who

<sup>14</sup> AC 9229:2; 9680:2; 9820:2; 10111; 10128:1

<sup>15</sup> AC 1935; 2851:3, 15; 3147:1e; 4060:4; 4151:3, 5; 4588:1e; 5288:1-2 6430; 6564; 9447; HH 603:5e; AE 413:2; 448:6

<sup>16</sup> AC 5126:2; 1056:3; HH 277:4; SE 2589

<sup>17</sup> AC 2621:2; 5002:1; 8267:2

<sup>18</sup> AC 10175; AE 983:4; 988:5; 989:2; MA 14; SE 6051(2); cf. AE 991:6e

<sup>19</sup> CL 519; AE 410:11; 434:16; AC 6348; NJHD 172

<sup>20</sup> AC 8904:12; cf. AC 3399:1e; 4989:1; 10648:2-3; HH 384e; AE 817:4

are obsessed with the literal sense of the story of Sodom focus on “a certain kind of foul behaviour that is totally unnatural” (AC 2322; cf. AC 2220), whether it is intentional rape or homosexuality. (I believe that the latter interpretation is incorrect and unjustifiable.) I would suggest that they need to look at what motivates a person. Consequently I believe that ministers such as Revds Willard Heinrichs (1993) and Bau-Madsen (1999) read these passages outside-in instead of inside-out. Leviticus 20 is primarily about what goes on inside us: “The same applies to the laws laid down relating to the permissible and the forbidden degrees of affinity. Each law in the Word concerning those matters has reference inwardly to the law of the affiliation and joining together of good and truth in heaven, and to the affiliations of evil and falsity in hell, which are separated from the former.”<sup>21</sup>

The story of Reuben sleeping with his father’s concubine (Genesis 35:22; 49:4) in the literal sense is about heterosexual adultery, not homosexual. However, angels will not see such details about the characters and what they get up to, because they “apprehend everything spiritually”.<sup>22</sup> All angels will see is what can go on in the hearts and minds of human beings, as is the case with Leviticus 18 and 20; and indeed Genesis 19. The “foul liaison” of Reuben and his father’s sex servant, is not primarily physical or sexual, but a spiritual one: “when separated from the good of charity faith is involved in a foul liaison”. (AC 6341; 6348) Swedenborg often talks of “foul” or “filthy” motives: “the wantonness of sexual desire, a foul thing” or “the lasciviousness of salaciousness, in itself foul”.<sup>23</sup> Swedenborg repeatedly talks about “foul loves” (*spurcus*) or “filthy reasonings” (*spurcus*) or “foul delights”. (*foedus*) I wonder whether some New Church ministers have merged both the spiritual sense with the natural sense? Similarly I would argue that CL 519 is about the interplay between our heart and mind, not about heterosexual adulterers or homosexuals. Quoting a passage about the Swedish King Charles XII supports my points, because his abominations (*nefaria*) came from within. (SE 4763)

I don’t believe Sodom is about homosexuality, so AC 2220 is not about “homosexual attraction”. Even if it were, it is really talking about a dominating and humiliating evil motive, whether in heterosexuals or homosexuals or whatever type of person. (cf. Buss (2015), 465) New Church hermeneutics of the Bible should go from the internal sense to the literal sense, and not vice versa. The characters and plots in the Bible are irrelevant to the angels and Christian people who are spiritually growing into angels,<sup>24</sup> unless they are the “face and hands” of the Word,<sup>25</sup> which is the small minority of passages in the Bible, which New Church people take literally. Just as we understand the Bible from the inside-out, so we judge people from the inside-out, that is, from their motives towards their actions. New Church morality is based on ends or motives. A person of whatever sexual orientation should be judged on their motives or intentions, not their actions, tentatively or as best we can.<sup>26</sup> They should be

<sup>21</sup> AC 3703:17; cf. AC 4434:10

<sup>22</sup> AR 316:6; AC 9125:1; 9249; HD 122e; LJ 39:7e; AE 100:2; 270:2; 768:2; 1104:2

<sup>23</sup> CL 459 [Chadwick]; CL 459:2 [Rogers]

<sup>24</sup> AC 2242:3; 3016e; AE 264e; 697:1; cf. AC 6226:2

<sup>25</sup> AE 778:6; SS 55 = TCR 229

<sup>26</sup> Swedenborg seems to suggest that we can judge a person’s civil and moral character but not their spirituality, which only God can. (CL 523; AE 629:14; SS(P) 5:3; John 7:24; SS 51:5 = TCR 226:5; SE 2450-2451; 4323; cf. CL 453)

appreciated and loved because of their spirituality, not what they get up to in their bedroom.

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