

What makes a 'Good City'?

A Jewish Perspective

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Sometimes it is helpful to answer a question by considering the opposite - what is NOT a good city. Whilst descriptions of a good city in the Hebrew Bible are rare¹, its antithesis, a wicked city, is found more than once. Perhaps the epitome of a wicked city is Sodom, although Babel and Nineveh are other examples. This paper will look at Sodom and why it was so wicked. It will begin by looking at Sodom in the Bible (Gen. 19) and how the picture of Sodom in further developed in the Babylonian Talmud (BT San. 109a-b)². Through looking at these texts we will have a picture of what the biblical and talmudic writers thought was so sinful about Sodom. In the conclusion we will discuss, by way of contrast, what should characterise a good city.

There is much else in the Bible and the Talmuds which would complement this material, for example teachings about the environment³ and, above all in the Talmuds, the importance of Torah study⁴. However, the focus of this paper will be Sodom because of the insights offered in the biblical and talmudic narratives.

Sodom in the Bible

We have the first indication of what sort of city Sodom is, when Lot chooses to go there after his shepherds quarrel with Abram's (his name has yet to be changed to Abraham). He chooses the richer pasture, but there is a warning: 'The people of Sodom were very wicked and sinful against the Eternal One' (Gen. 13:3). As the rabbinic commentators will later pick up, it is not just wicked or sinful, but *very wicked and sinful against the Eternal One*. The nature of the wickedness and sinfulness is not spelt out at this stage, but there is a hint when God discloses to Abraham his plan to destroy the city. God says, 'The cry of Sodom and Gemora is great and their sin is very heavy' (Gen. 18:20). 'The cry' implies a cry of anguish. It is the same word that will be used for the cry of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, a cry of hardship and oppression. The extent of the wickedness is clear when Abraham argues with God that if ten good men can be found, the city should not be destroyed. Not even ten good men are found, and the lack is emphasised by the phrase 'from young to old' (Gen. 19:4).

What is it that makes the people of Sodom so wicked? In Christian tradition, and in the English language, their sin has become synonymous with sexual impropriety, and in particular, homosexual acts, as defined by the word 'sodomy.'⁵ The biblical story is enigmatic. Homosexual acts are hinted at when the men of Sodom call on Lot: 'Bring out the men that we may know them.' 'Know' may simply mean 'know who they are', but the verb in the Hebrew Bible frequently implies sexual relations. This meaning is supported by Lot offering his daughters to the men instead.⁶ However, even if there is a sexual mean-

ing here, it is not the major focus of the chapter. This is rather the refusal of hospitality to the strangers. It forms a striking contrast with Abraham's hospitality to them in the previous chapter. It represents a serious sin, for refusing hospitality to people in the desert may have effectively condemned them to death.

Another theme that is hinted at is just judgment. Abraham has pleaded with God to save the city with the words, 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do justly?' (Gen. 18:25). The men of Sodom say to Lot, 'This one came to dwell amongst us and now he persists in judging us' (Gen. 19:9). This echoing of words suggests that the city is indeed being judged. By the time of the prophets, Sodom was seen as a symbol of wickedness and of utter destruction.⁷ The nature of its sin is not usually made explicit. However Ezekiel states, 'Only this is the sin of your sister Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and the needy'⁸ (Ezek. 16:49). This aspect of Sodom's wrong doing will emerge as dominant in the Talmud, together with the perversion of justice.

Sodom in the Talmud

The Mishnah⁹ states that the men of Sodom are among those who have no place in the world to come (Sanhedrin 10:3). The Talmud explores in detail why this should be so. It begins by interpreting the apparently superfluous words of Gen. 13:13 (see above). An anonymous explanation suggests: "'Wicked' in this world 'and sinful' for the world to come." Rav Judah offers another opinion: "'Wicked' with their bodies and 'sinful' with their property... 'very' -that they sinned with intention." A further anonymous opinion interprets 'very' as referring to the shedding of blood.

The text goes on to suggest that the wickedness of Sodom springs from their prosperity. They became so proud of the wealth that had been bestowed on them by God that they did not wish to share it¹⁰. Instead, they decided, 'Why should wayfarers diminish our wealth? Come, let the law of the wayfarer be forgotten amongst us.' They wished to keep their wealth solely for themselves, and not share it with strangers, as was customary.

The Talmud goes on to elaborate how this was implemented. Wealthy wayfarers were placed near walls which would be pushed on them to kill them so that the men of Sodom could take their money. They would also give the wealthy men balsam so that at night, they could be sniffed out by dogs and their money taken from them.

From forgetting the law, the Sodomites perverted it so that the rich benefited and the poor suffered and society was ruthless in its treatment of the poor and the stranger. The rest of the section is quoted below in full¹¹. It shows how, stage by stage, seemingly petty crime became systematic and how the whole system of justice was perverted. But we also see how three people, an orphan and fuller (both un-named) and Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, undermined the system by their wit and intelligence.

They ruled: He that has [only] one ox must tend [all the oxen of the town] for one day; but he who has none must tend [them] two days. Now a certain orphan, the son of a widow, was given oxen to tend. He went and killed them and [then] said to them [the So-

domites], 'He who has an ox, let him take one hide; he who has none, let him take two hides.' 'What is the meaning of this?' they exclaimed. Said he: 'The final usage [i.e. the disposal of the ox when dead] must be as the initial one; just as the initial usage is that he who possesses one ox must tend for one day, and he who has none must tend two days, so should be the final usage: he who has one ox should take one hide, and he who has none should take two.' [Likewise they ruled,] He who crosses with the ferry must pay one *zuz* (coin)[for the privilege], but he who does not [entering by another way], must give two. If one had rows of bricks, every person came and took one, saying, "I have taken only one." If someone spread out garlic or onions [to dry them], every person came and took one, saying, 'I have taken only one.'"

There were four judges in Sodom, [named] Shakrai, Shakurai, Zayyafi and Mazle Dina.¹² Now, if a man assaulted his neighbour's wife and bruised her, they would say [to the husband], 'Give her to him, that she may become pregnant for thee.' If one cut off the ear of his neighbour's ass, they would order, 'Give it to him until it grows again.' If one wounded his neighbour they would say to him [the victim], 'Give him a fee for bleeding thee.' He who crossed over with the ferry had to pay four *zuzim*, whilst he who crossed through the water had to pay eight. On one occasion, a certain fuller happened to come there. Said they to him, 'Give us four *zuzim* [for the use of the ferry].' 'But,' protested he, 'I crossed through the water!' 'If so,' said they, 'thou must give eight *zuzim* for passing through the water.' He refused to give it, so they assaulted him. He went before the judge, who ordered, 'Give them a fee for bleeding thee.' Thereupon he took a stone and smote the judge. 'What is this!' he exclaimed. He replied, 'The fee that thou owest me give to this man [who attacked me], whilst my money will remain in *statu quo*.'

Now, they had beds upon which travellers slept. If he [the guest] was too long, they shortened him [by lopping off his feet]; if too short, they stretched him out. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, happened to go there. Said they to him, 'Arise and sleep on this bed!' He replied, 'I have vowed since the day of my mother's death not to sleep in a bed.' If a poor man happened to come there, every resident gave him a *denar* (a gold coin) upon which he wrote his name, but no bread was given him. When he died, each came and took back his. They made this agreement amongst themselves: whoever invites a man [a stranger] to a feast shall be stripped of his garment. Now, a banquet was in progress, when Eliezer chanced there, but they gave him no bread. Wishing to dine, he went and sat down at the end of them all. Said they to him, 'Who invited thee here?' He replied to the one sitting near him, 'Thou didst invite me.' The latter said to himself, 'Peradventure they will hear that I invited him, and strip me of my garments!' So he took up his raiment and fled without. Thus he [Eliezer] did to all, until they had all gone; whereupon he consumed the entire repast.

A certain maiden gave some bread to a poor man, [hiding it] in a pitcher. On the matter becoming known, they daubed her with honey and placed her on the parapet of the wall, and the bees came and consumed her. Thus it is written, And the Lord said, The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah, because it is great [*rabbah*],: whereon Rab Judah commented in Rab's name: On account of the maiden [*ribah*].

The wickedness of Sodom is underlined in a number of ways. From the outset, their pride in their possessions is noted. They felt that they owned them as of right and did not

wish to share them. Rather they wished for more. Rather than sharing their wealth with wayfarers, they saw wayfarers as fair targets for their wealth. They took wealth both by theft and by murder (though making it seem like manslaughter). They justified their acquisition of wealth by claiming their sins were small - the taking of a single brick, or onion, or garlic - though the cumulative effect was catastrophic for the owner of the stolen objects.

The wickedness was pervasive. It reached (or perhaps started with) those who should have been the upholders of moral values, the judges. The passage is satirical. The names of the judges underline that they represent the opposite of what judges should be. Instead of being truthful and upholding justice, they are liars and perverters of justice. This is a subversion of the biblical view of what judges should be: 'You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates which the Eternal One your God is giving to you, according to your tribes. And they shall judge the people with just judgments. They shall not turn away justice and they shall not recognize persons. They shall not take a bribe, for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and twist the words of the righteous.' (Deut. 16:18-20)¹³. These judges sit in the gate, but they recognize the rich and turn away justice.

The judgments of Sodom came to be epitomized as '*midat S'dom*' (the attribute of Sodom) in rabbinic literature, as defined in Pirkei Avot in the Mishnah: "'What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours" - this is the average attribute, but some say it is the attribute of Sodom' (Avot 5:10). It is the opposite of '*midat hasidut*' the attribute of kindness beyond what is required by the law. The law is adhered to in Sodom, but it is a harsh, twisted law which has no regard for true justice. Everything has to fit the law, regardless of whether it is right, in the same way that everyone has to fit their bed, and if they do not fit, they will be made to suffer until they do.

Other aspects of the description of Sodom also emphasise its undermining of the values of the Torah¹⁴. The Torah calls for, and legislates for, the care of the orphan and the widow, e.g. in the commands 'You shall not afflict any widow or orphan' (Ex. 22:21 and 'You shall not pervert the justice due to the stranger or the orphan, nor take the widow's garment for a pledge' (Deut. 24:17). The orphan in the Talmudic story of Sodom is exploited, in contradiction to these principles. But the orphan himself subverts the justice of Sodom. This serves to further ridicule the men of Sodom by showing that the orphan is more intelligent, and by implication, of greater worth than the men of Sodom.

Care for the poor and the stranger is, likewise, emphasized in the Torah (thirty-nine times according to Rabbinic tradition). In addition to the verse just cited, there are commands to leave the gleanings of the field and a sheaf that is left behind in the field for the stranger (Lev. 19: 9-10; Deut. 24:19). The prohibition of oppressing the poor was linked to the Israelites' own experience of being a stranger and a slave in Egypt (e.g. Ex. 22:20; Deut. 24:17-18).

The treatment of the stranger in Sodom was therefore antithetical to the values expressed in the Torah. It was all the more abhorrent because it was cloaked in the façade of acting according to the law and indeed giving to the stranger, but in a form, gold coins, which was of no use, so that the men of Sodom knew that the stranger would still die and they would be able to reclaim their money¹⁵.

The concluding sin, the treatment of the young maiden, serves to underline the horror of Sodom. This section introduces a pun (*ribah* and *rabah*, see above) to link the sins of Sodom with the opening line, that their sin was great. But it is also a culmination of their wicked deeds. Following on from their perversion of justice in order to benefit the rich and further impoverish the poor and their cruel mistreatment of the wayfarer, the last section still horrifies the reader. A young girl, representing the most vulnerable segment of society, is acting with compassion and humanity, embodying all that the men of Sodom are not. She, alone of all the inhabitants, does what should be done. Because of her act of kindness, she is subjected to a cruel punishment which causes her to cry out, so that her cry reaches to heaven and the punishment of Sodom is confirmed, not only in this world but for eternity.

Conclusions - What is a Good City?

In asking the question, 'What is a good city?', many of the qualities could equally well apply to a good state, a good country or a good society in general. But Sodom is a city, and there are therefore features which apply particularly to a city. It is a walled city with gates. It is therefore a closed society. This means, firstly, that unlike a group in the countryside or the desert, which can be approached by anyone, the inhabitants of the walled city can determine who can enter it and meet its inhabitants. Secondly, it means that the inhabitants are crowded together, aware of all their neighbours doings for better or worse. They have a tendency to group together and to exclude 'the other', the people who come from outside the city walls. The example of Sodom is a particular warning to city dwellers.

We learn what that Talmud expects of the 'good city' from the beginning of the passage. We learn that wealth is from God. It should not be taken for granted or lead to hubris. It does not belong exclusively to those who own it, but is given on trust, so that it can be used to help the poor and the stranger. The wealth is especially to be used for the most vulnerable, the orphan and the widow. It is to be used as well for those who are passing through, the strangers who are dependent on the goodwill of the cities they pass through. The 'law of the wayfarer', which the men of Sodom abandoned, demanded that the wayfarer be cared for.

We learn that small actions matter. The effect of accumulated small thefts - as of bricks and onions - is the total removal of property. Small actions of depriving others have an accumulated effect of leaving them destitute. Conversely we can extrapolate that small acts of giving can accumulate to sustain the poor.

Finally, we learn about justice. Firstly, we learn that justice can easily be perverted. It can be used to protect the vulnerable but it can also be used to exploit them. We have to be alert always to the possibility that justice will be abused and used by the powerful for their own ends. Secondly, important as justice is, it can be misused even whilst abiding by the law. Application of the law too strictly can also be harmful to those the law is designed to protect. Compassion is essential in the application of the law. And thirdly, justice is not just there to protect the inhabitants of the city. It is there also, and especially, to protect the outsider: the wayfarer, the stranger, the sojourner who is not a citizen.

The passage also shows that, for all their arrogance and cruelty, the men of Sodom were vulnerable. Just as they subverted justice, the system they developed could also be subverted and undermined by those it was designed to exclude – the orphan, the fuller and the wayfarer, Abraham’s servant Eliezer. Eliezer’s action at the banquet shows that the climate which the men of Sodom created by excluding the stranger was corrosive. It resulted in mutual mistrust, so that each man at the banquet feared he would be exposed (literally and metaphorically) for inviting a stranger. Not only those at the margins suffered, but so did those at the centre, whose lives were built on mistrust and suspicion that they would be treated in the way they treated others.

The good city, then, is a city which, though it may be physically enclosed, is open to the stranger and the wayfarer. It is a city which is built on justice, fairly applied but tempered by compassion. It is a city in which the poor are treated with kindness and generosity. If the inhabitants of the good city do all this, they, too, will benefit from a city which is built on trust and mutual benefit.

Notes

¹ Jerusalem is held up as a special, holy city, but there is no suggestion that its people behave particularly well or that it represents an idyllic place in the present, as opposed to a future hope.

² There are two Talmuds, the Palestinian (PT) and Babylonian (BT). The Babylonian Talmud is the later and more extensive of the two. It was compiled in around the 6th century, although it continued to be added to and edited for at least a further two centuries.

³ E.g. the stipulation that a tannery should be placed at least 50 cubits from the city limits because of the foul odours emanating from it (Mishnah Bava Batra 2:9)

⁴ E.g. BT Shabbat 119b states that Jerusalem was destroyed because there were no schools for children. PT Hagigah 1:7, 76c describes the true guardians of the city as the teachers of Scripture and Mishnah.

⁵ See e.g. Patrick Vandermeersch. “Sodomites, Gays and Biblical Scholars. A Gathering Organised by Peter Damian?” in: *Sodom’s Sin: Gen. 18-19 and its Interpretations*, ed. Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar. Brill, Leiden, 2004, pp. 149-171 and other articles in the same volume.

⁶ This shocking treatment of his daughters should not go without comment, but the purpose of this essay is not to analyse Lot and his relationship with his daughters so it will not be discussed further.

⁷ e.g. Is. 3:9, Jer. 23:14

⁸ Translation from *The Tanakh*. Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1988

⁹ Code of Jewish law compiled in the second century CE by Rabbi Judah the Prince.

¹⁰ The prooftexts for their wealth are taken from the book of Job, the ultimate questioner of God’s justice.

¹¹ The translation is taken from the Soncino edition of the Talmud, ed. I. Epstein, London 1987

¹² Meaning Liar, Awful Liar, Forger and Perverter of Justice.

¹³ See also Deut. 21, the ritual to be performed if an unknown corpse is found between two cities, which demonstrates that the leaders of the city were held accountable for violence within their jurisdiction.

¹⁴ The Torah can be variously defined, most often as either the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Five Books of Moses) or Jewish teachings in general. Here both definitions apply.

¹⁵ One is reminded of the way the Nazis worked, strictly according to their laws and using euphemisms in order not to refer directly to the mass murder they were carrying out and to mask the horror of what they were doing.