

**RE-INTERPRETING “SODOM AND GOMORRAH” PASSAGES
IN THE CONTEXT OF HOMOSEXUALITY CONTROVERSY: A
NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

The issue of human sexuality is a complex one, and it has been a controversial issue from time immemorial. Scholars have appealed to various evidences to support their arguments for or against any sexual issues they are interested in. One of the passages used to support or argue against homosexuality, for instance, is Gen 19 which contains the story of the destruction of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Traditionally, Sodom and Gomorrah were known and described as cities which God destroyed because of their sin of homosexuality. To call a man Sodomite is to refer to the person as a homosexual. This has been the interpretation of the Church until recently when certain scholars began to challenge this interpretation. Such scholars interpret Gen 19 differently in contrast to the orthodox interpretation. The sin of the people of Sodom is “inhospitality and not homosexuality” as this new interpretation proposes. Hence, this paper examines some of the passages relating to Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old and New Testaments in order to assert the rightness or otherwise of the two interpretations given above. The methodology adopted is linguistic analysis and exegetical method. The study maintains that top on the list of sins in Gen 19 is homosexuality as it is clearly stated in the passage. It concludes that since the two angels came to Lot and not to the men of Sodom the people could not have been guilty of inhospitality as being proposed by scholars like Bartlett¹ and Phyllis Bird.²

Introduction

The age-long controversies surrounding homosexuality have not been laid to rest, most especially with the recent resurgence of same-sex marriage on the global scene and Nigeria is not without her own share. Greenberg and Bystryn have noted that historical and anthropological researches have documented wide variability in the social acceptance of homosexual activity. In some times and places, some forms of homosexual interaction have been fully institutionalized, sometimes serving religious and educational functions. Yet homosexuality has also met with hostile responses ranging from mild disapprobation or ridicule to imprisonment and execution.³ Many reasons have been adduced for same-sex sexual orientation such as increasing urbanization, unhappy childhood experiences, and ineffectual parental relationships among others by Robinson *et al.*⁴

Many scholars have lent their voices to the issue from different perspectives. Barbara Fassler⁵ has documented various theories put forward by scholars on the origin or emergence of homosexuality. These theories ranged from the “Trapped Soul theory” where traits of homosexuality are seen as hereditary; congenital problem arising from mal-formation and accident to the embryo in which a woman’s soul is shut up in a man’s body and vice versa; and “transvestism” where a child had loved to dress in clothes of the opposite sex. M. Levin⁶ also supports the theory of genetic influence on the sexual orientation of a person and argues that a person should not be discriminated against on the basis of the sexual orientation which has been determined uncontrolled factors such as genes and upbringing.

However, despite these theories of origin of homosexuality ascribing it to a condition outside of the person, Burack and Josephson⁷ put forward the opinion of the Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), an association formed in the early 1970s by parents who supported their self-identified lesbian or gay children. PFLAG believed that the cause of homosexuality is not genetic, and that there is no gay gene and no single biological explanation for gay, lesbian and bisexual sexual orientation. In spite of these, the controversies surrounding homosexuality are still lingering. While some countries are legalizing it, others, like Nigeria, are repelling it with passion. Hence, this paper interprets Sodom and Gomorrah passages in both the Old and New Testaments as they relate to homosexuality and also to look at the responses and dispositions of the Church and the society to same-sex

relationship in Nigeria.

Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19 and Homosexual Controversy

Gen 19 gives the story of Sodom and Gomorrah which were destroyed as a result of their wickedness and unrighteousness. It should be noted that the background to the story in Gen 19 begins from Gen 18 when Abraham unwittingly entertained three angels in the form of human beings, one of whom was referred to as the Lord. At their departure, the Lord gave Abraham privileged information as to their next point of call and their mission there. Abraham was told that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah was great, and because their sin was very grave, the angels were going to the city to find out whether the charges brought against her were true or not. Probably, Abraham had heard about the wickedness of the city himself and knew that it was likely that the city would be destroyed. Thus, he interceded for the town not to be destroyed if ten righteous people were found there. The angel of the Lord consented to his request. Eventually, two of the three angels went to Sodom, lodged in Lot's house where the men of Sodom came and insisted that Lot should bring the angels out so that they might 'know' them carnally (Gen. 19:1-5). In other words, the men of Sodom wanted to have sexual intercourse with the angels which appeared as men to them.

H. J. Toensing⁸ is right when he says that associating the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah with homosexuality is common among the Christian Right. More specifically, many associate God's annihilation of these cities with the idea that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah were gay, engaging in sodomy. However, scholars such as R. E. Baxbaum⁹ have challenged the traditional interpretation of the Gen 19 to mean sin of homosexuality. For instance, Harry A. Woggon¹⁰ in his argument for homosexuality differentiates between homosexuality and homosexual acts. To him, homosexuality is a psychological condition involving emotional and psychosexual leanings toward others of the same sex. It is a feeling and not an act. Therefore, the performance of homosexual acts is not necessary evidence of homosexuality. But one wonders whether there can be a performance of an act without first having a mental picture of what is to be done? Every action is a product of what one thinks; it is a product of one's mindset. The problem with Woggon's submission is that he fails to establish that there is no connection between a feeling and the actual performance of homosexual acts.

On the Sodom and Gomorrah story, he is of the view that since the

verb used to describe the action of the men of Sodom, *yadha* (to know), can mean “to engage in coitus” as it is often used in scriptures, which is also translated “to abuse” in the Jerusalem Bible, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah should be a violation of the sacred obligation of hospitality toward strangers (and by inference in Luke. 10:10-13) and that sexual assault should only be a secondary reason.

This line of interpretation, to us, is only a play down on the sin of homosexuality on the part of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah. For instance, it could be rightly argued that sin of inhospitality could not have caused God to bring about the total annihilation of the great city of Sodom. At best, he could have destroyed those involved in the act of inhospitality and not the whole cities. Sin of inhospitality should not have warranted death since an act of hospitality depends on the individual’s discretion and liberality and not necessarily by divine fiat. The fact that God decided to wipe out all the people in the city of Sodom indicates that the sin was much more than inhospitality. Furthermore, the contents of the intercession of Abraham to God on behalf of the city of Sodom to be spared also showed the perverseness of the city when there could not be found ten righteous people in the city. Daniel O’Bryan, in describing the sin of Sodom, is of the opinion that “God’s fury and the absolute nature of his destruction are some indication of the severity of the offense.”¹¹

This poses another problem. The great sin of the city has been ascribed to men, what were the women doing? Why couldn’t the women be righteous? Or does it mean that when the men were practising homosexuality the women were practising lesbianism? The Bible is silent on this and that is the reason why Toensing¹² argues that the role and presence of women has been overlooked by scholars in the story. And that as their presence is acknowledged, it could be safely assumed that the sexual orientation of men and women of Sodom is heterosexual and not homosexual. According to Toensing, “the wickedness of these cities is the inhospitable treatment of resident aliens and sojourners at its worst, through the sexual humiliation of rape, linked with the wickedness of idolatry.”

Also, the fact that there were some homosexuals in the city doesn’t mean that the whole men in the city are homosexuals. It is possible that only a group of people were involved in the sexual acts. As a matter of fact, there has not been any community in history where all the inhabitants are homosexuals. In fact, Toensing agrees that Gen 19:14 indicates that Lot’s daughters are betrothed to men of Sodom. Quite literally, then, the

cities on the Jordan plain cannot be full of only homosexual men, for at least two of them are portrayed as committing themselves to marriages with women. They can also be bisexual. In trying to play down the sin of homosexuality of the city of Sodom, Toensing also appeals to the legal meaning given to the verb *yadha* as used in the text to mean “to interrogate.” This means the men of Sodom wanted to know whether the guests were friends or foes, whether they truly deserve hospitality, or they are to face hostility.¹³

It must be pointed out that many of the pro-homosexuality scholars have indeed redefined and limited the meaning of the verb *yadah* that is used in Gen 19:5 so as to accommodate their view just like Toensing. For instance, Derrick Bailey¹⁴ argues that the verb *yadah* in Gen 19:5 should be translated according to its more common meaning, “to get acquainted.” Given this, Bailey explains that what happened in Gen 19:5 is that the men of Sodom simply wanted to become acquainted with the men in Lot’s house. Their insistence on inconveniencing these visitors was a serious breach of the code of hospitality. In other words, the men of Sodom were guilty of inhospitality. Bailey argues further, as quoted by Ukleja¹⁵ that the word *yadah* appears over 943 times in the Old Testament and only 12 times does it mean “to have intercourse with.” Therefore, he argues, the circumstances in Sodom could not fit the sexual connotation of the word “know.” He concludes by reasoning from the fact that Lot was a resident foreigner. As such, Lot had exceeded his rights by receiving two foreigners whose credentials had not been examined.

However, it must be pointed out that the verb *yadah* is also used euphemistically among the Hebrew to express sexual mating. Just like in the Yoruba culture where an act of sexual intercourse is not allowed to be expressed literally, phrase such as “*Ibalo po*” (meaning “having sexual intercourse”) is used in lieu of “having sex”. Using this word avoids the use of offensive or irritating expression for sexual intercourse and to prevent children from being corrupted by erotic expressions. In the Bible, Adam was said to know his wife, meaning having sexual intercourse with her which resulted to the birth of Cain. This same verb is used for many other biblical characters to indicate sexual intercourse and it is in this sense of sexual mating that it is used in Gen 19:5 because the pleading and bargaining of Lot with the people that follow show that sexual mating is involved. In Ukleja’s view, the context determines the meaning of a word used in a passage. In the case of Gen 19, he authoritatively affirms that in both verses 5 and 8 the word *yadah* should be translated “to have sexual

intercourse with.” The context does not lend itself to any other credible interpretation.¹⁶

If Woggon’s inhospitality stance and Toensing heterosexual argument in Sodom are to be upheld, the question can be asked, what was the offence of the strangers that would make the men of the city to abuse them? Also, it can also be argued that if the people had not come for sexual mating, why would Lot offer his virgin daughters for the people to sleep with? Or what could have been the correlation between the coming of the men of the city of Sodom and Gomorrah to molest Lot’s strangers as a means of inhospitality and Lot’s offering of his virgin daughters if sexual mating was not involved?

“Sodom and Gomorrah” in Other Old Testament Passages

It is of interest to note that the issue of homosexuality was not only known during the period of the revelation of the torah, allusions were also made to it during the periods of the Judges and Prophets. For instance in Judges 19: 22-30 an incidence is recorded of a Levite who went to take his concubine from her father’s house and on the way back lodged in a man’s house where the sons of the Belial of the city came to know him and sent his concubine to them in exchange. This story is a reminiscent of the coming of the Sodomites to Lot’s house to molest his guests in Gen 19 that has been considered above. The only difference between this story and that of Lot’s is the fact that the men of Sodom did not accept the substitute provided by Lot, whereas the men of Gibeah accepted the concubine of the Levite and defiled her all through the night. But the question may be asked, “Can this be regarded as an act of homosexuality?” Did God frown at this incidence at all as he did in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah? The story that follows this event indicates that the children of Israel who rose to fight against the men of Gibeah who were Benjaminites were defeated many times before they overpowered the Benjaminites afterwards. It may be safely surmised that God initially allowed the Israelites camp to suffer casualties because they took vengeance into their own hands whereas in Lot’s case, the men were conquered by supernatural intervention. But at the end, God indeed punished the men of Gibeah for their wickedness.

In the assessment of Schindler,¹⁷ the story above links communities that were known for their immorality and spiritual corruption with homosexuality. He also points out that homosexuality is not an acceptable behaviour because if it were acceptable, it is unlikely that it would be singled out in the Torah. By the period of the Prophets, the term Sodom

had taken a metaphoric sense in which it now stands for all kinds of abominable practices that were going on among the people of Yahweh. This is the sense in which Prophet Ezekiel used the word Sodom in Ezekiel 16:48-50. In contemporary time, when a person is referred to as a sodomite, it is a well known synonym for homosexuality.

It must be pointed out that, even though there are few references to the issue of homosexuality in the OT, the prohibitions against it are strong. R. Schindler demonstrates that the reasons for the prohibitions against homosexuality in the *halacha* have been severe in contrast to that of lesbianism.¹⁸ God, according to Peucker,¹⁹ frowns at the act and condemns it in strong terms, and it is also connected with all abominable practices, or perversity in all the places where references are made to it in the OT.

“Sodom and Gomorrah” in New Testament Passages

The term “Sodom and Gomorrah” appears in the New Testament 10 times: six times in the Synoptic gospels, once in Paul’s epistle, twice in the Catholic letters and once in the Revelation of John. The two cities are mentioned en passant in the following passages: Mat 10:15; 11:23-24; Luke 10:12; 17:29; Rom 9:29; II Peter 2:6; Jude 1:7; and Rev. 11:8. In Matthew 10 Jesus mentioned that it would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than the people who rejected his disciples. It is also used in the same manner in Luke 10:12 but Gomorrah is not mentioned here. In Luke 17: 29 Jesus mentioned that fire and sulphur were rained upon Sodom to destroy it. Gomorrah is not mentioned likewise. In Rom 9: 29, Paul quoted the prophecy of Isaiah where Sodom and Gomorrah were mentioned as being childless. In 2 Peter 2:6 it is mentioned that the two cities were turned into ashes. In Rev. 11:8 “Sodom” is used metaphorically with Egypt to depict monstrous wickedness and idolatry respectively.

For the purpose of clarity, Jude 1: 7 will be examined because of its affinity with what is said about Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19. The unaccented Greek version reads thus: *ως σοδομα και γομορρα και αι περι αυτας πολεις τον ομοιον τροπον τουτοις εκπορνευσασαι και απελθουσαι οπισω σαρκος ετερας προκεινται δειγμα πυρος αιωνιου δικην υπεχουσαι* (Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally, and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire).

In their attempts to interpret this text, certain scholars are of the view that the verse is similar to 1 Enoch 7: 1-2 because Jude makes allusion to the book later in his epistle. Hence, “sarko.j e`te,raj” is taken to

be a reference to angels because angels were mentioned in Enoch as marrying women. This is also an addendum to the “angelic beings” in Gen 6 who were marrying daughters of humans. This interpretation is awkward in the sense that Jude 1:7 is better understood as a direct reference to Gen 19 and a commentary on the text. It is a further expatiation on the wickedness and immorality of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and their surrounding cities, that is, Admah, Zobaim and Zoar. Montoya has this to say on the text,

The expression, “in the same way”, points to the violation of the divine order by the angels in Jude 1:6 and so the men of Sodom trespassed their divine order. That sexual sin is at the root of Sodom’s condemnation is proven by the expressions, “indulged in gross immoralities,” “went after strange flesh”, and “the sensual conduct of unprincipled men.”²⁰

It is to be noted that all the NT references to Sodom or Gomorrah emphasize the judgment of God on the two cities. The references in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke depict the cities as the measure of punishment God will mete out to those who reject the disciples. This is what certain scholars use to conclude that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is inhospitality. The passages do not imply that. Jesus was not discussing the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. But in most cases where Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned apart from Gen 19, they are presented as an epitome of God’s wrath and punishment. It is only in the epistles of Peter and Jude that we have more glimpse of the sin of the two cities which can be summed up as sexual perversion or immorality. No known scholar has denied this fact. What the pro-homosexuality scholars emphasize is that homosexuality is not described in the passage but other sexual sins.

Homosexuality in the New Testament

Different views about homosexuality in the New Testament can be categorized into three. The first view, which is conservative, represented by scholars like Schreiner,²¹ posits that NT prohibits homosexuality; the second view, which is liberal, represented by scholars such as Boswell²² and Scroggs,²³ rejects the conservative view by re-interpreting the various OT and NT passages on homosexuality, while the third view, represented by Debel,²⁴ which reconstructs the conservative view, argues that the NT understanding of homosexual love was different from the contemporary understanding. In other words, the kind of homosexuality that NT prohibits

is different from what is practiced nowadays.

Scholars who uphold the conservative view argue that the NT teachings on homosexuality are based on the creation story in Gen 1-2 which depicts the distinction between man and woman. This view understands that the sin committed by the people of Sodom in Gen 19 was homosexuality. Jude 1: 7 is interpreted as a confirmation of homosexuality as the sin committed by Sodom and Gomorrah. Schreiner rightly points out that even though Jesus never addressed homosexuality directly in his teaching, his understanding of the creation story indicated that he regarded marriage to be a union between a man and a woman, thereby prohibiting homosexuality, polygamy and divorce. Conservative interpreters also point out that Rom 1: 26-27; 1 Cor 6: 9 and 1 Tim 1:10 are major NT passages that directly prohibit homosexuality and lesbianism.

The Greek words used for homosexuality in the NT are *μαλακοι* and *ἀρσενοκοίτης*. Commenting on *μαλακοι*, Fee²⁵ believes that the word had “the basic meaning of ‘soft’; but it also became a pejorative epithet for men who were ‘soft’ or ‘effeminate,’ most likely referring to the younger, ‘passive’ partner in a pederastic relationship – the most common form of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world.” *ἀρσενοκοίτης* is a compound noun formed from *ἀρσην* “male” and *κοίτη*, “bed”. This suggests that *ἀρσενοκοίτης* is a man who lies with another man. Schreiner²⁶ suggests that the term *ἀρσενοκοῖται* designates the sin of homosexuality and that Paul took the word from the Septuagint version of Lev 18: 22 where there is phrase *ἀρσενος κοίτην*. This phrase affirms that *ἀρσενοκοῖται* is a vivid way of denoting intercourse between males. Scholars like Fee,²⁷ Malick,²⁸ and Morris,²⁹ among others, believe that *μαλακοι* and *ἀρσενοκοῖται* denote the passive and active partners in homosexuality respectively and that the pairing of *ἀρσενοκοῖται* and *μαλακοι* in 1 Cor 6:9 is an indication that homosexual relations are in Paul’s view. In other words, the two words describe not only homosexual behaviour, but also the roles of the two people involved in the act.

On the other hand, liberal scholars and those who reconstruct traditional interpretations hold the view that the NT does not prohibit homosexuality or any same-sex practice. They contend that “homosexuality” and the new understanding of homosexual behaviour were propounded in the nineteenth century. The kind of erotic relationship Paul and other authors of the Bible knew was different from the contemporary understanding of erotic same-sex relationships.³⁰ Duffield³¹ even goes further to say that Rom 1: 25-27 does not “refer to unnatural

sexual practices as sin or morally wrong but rather as unusual or shameful and socially dishonourable, that is, outside Israelite purity rules. Same-sex practices are described here as shameful, not sinful.” One wonders how a shameful act is not a sin!

Nevertheless, we agree with conservative scholars who affirm that the NT prohibits homosexuality and other sexual sins. As noted above, Schreiner and Ukleja are right in their interpretations of Gen 19; Rom 1: 26-27; 1 Cor 6: 9; 1 Tim 1: 10; and Jude 7. Loughlin’s claim that homosexuality described in the NT is different from the type that exists in the contemporary period is specious and arcane.

Homosexuality Controversy in Nigeria

There have been various arguments on the origin of homosexuality in Africa. It was generally held that homosexuality originated with the coming of colonialism. J. H. Sweet³² quoted President Mugabe to have said that homosexuality is an imported vice that came with British colonialism. However, Anderson,³³ has refuted this view. Although, he does not have enough information to support his claims, he is able to point out that same-sex relationships existed among soldiers and some women in a way that is different from Western understanding and definition of homosexuality and lesbianism.³⁴ Ajibade has also proved from Yoruba oral tradition that homosexuality is as old as the Yoruba nation. He noted, however, that though it was practiced as evident in some oral traditions, it was not encouraged. It was regarded as unnatural.³⁵ Both Sweet and Anderson believe that colonialists and missionaries were responsible for the anti-gay attitude in Africa because they made anti-gay law and severely punished offenders. For example, during the eighteenth century in England, several people were executed because of homosexuality. The British colonialists came to Africa from this background according to the view of Gilbert and Barkun.³⁶

Sweet³⁷ also identifies transvestite homosexuality among traditional Africans where men wore female dresses and that such people are assumed to be endowed with spiritual power and not necessarily engaging in same-sex marriage. He observes that in large parts of Africa, spiritual leadership roles have traditionally been the preserve of women. But where male spiritual leaders exist in African religions, there was a strong association with homosexuality, especially the transvestite type. However, Sweet cautions that African homosexual behaviour was not

confined to these men, nor were all African transvestites endowed with spiritual powers.

Allman *et al* have also observed that there were reports of men same-sex sexual practices in sub-Saharan Africa as early as 17th century. Using the focus group discussion, they claim to have discovered that 31% of the sample population in Nigeria was self-identified gay and all others with heterosexual orientation also reported to have had sex with man at one time or the other privately. Yet because of cultural norms and taboos as well as national criminal codes outlawing same-sex sexual activities, such practices are enveloped by denial, secrecy, stigmatization and discrimination. They argue that one of the factors that have accounted for the prevalence of HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa is men same-sex sexual practices.³⁸

Traditionally, in Nigeria, homosexuality was never an issue because it was regarded as foreign and unnatural to the different peoples of the country, be it the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Hausa or over two hundred and fifty minority ethnic groups. In the Yoruba cultural setting, it was unthinkable for anyone to make a sexual move to a person of his or her own sex. The controversies surrounding homosexuality in Nigeria did not become a remarkable issue until recently when some homosexuals were threatened to abandon their lifestyle and worship centre and when the Anglican Church of Nigeria became the leading voice against the ordination of gay bishops in the Anglican Church Worldwide. The two issues made the international community interested in Nigerian's attitude to same-sex practice. The first issue started when a man by the name Rev. Rowland Jide Macaulay established a church known as Rainbow Church in Lagos. The church soon became a haven for Nigerian homosexuals and lesbians especially those who were in Lagos. Angry mobs which could not hold their anger occasionally visited the church to beat up the members. Rev. Macaulay had to leave the country for England from where he is now advocating gay rights.³⁹ Another prominent issue was the case of a self acclaimed gay, Bisi Alimi, who was interviewed by the television ace, Funmi Iyanda. The interview was transmitted nationwide on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). This aggravated many people and led to the censorship of the programme by Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation.⁴⁰ Due to the harsh treatment they receive on daily basis, many Nigerian gays and lesbians have left the country for UK or USA. Some of them could not secure asylum abroad and are on the verge of being deported. An example is that of Nnabuife's case as reported by Paul Canning.⁴¹

The most universal and remarkable among the cases involving same-sex practice in the history of homosexuality and lesbianism in Nigeria is that of the role of the Anglican Church of Nigeria in the global debate on same-sex marriage. The then Primate of the Anglican Church, Archbishop Jasper Peter Akinola led the Global South wing of the Anglican Communion which consists of African countries, Asian and Latin America countries, to revolt against the decision of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America to ordain gays as bishops and the inability of the Archbishop of Canterbury to resist the move. The Lambert meeting of bishops that usually holds every decade was boycotted by the Global South wing led by Akinola. He and his followers went to Jerusalem to hold a different meeting which was attended by conservative Anglican faithfuls all over the world where they condemned the ordination of gays in the Anglican Church worldwide. A. O. Nkwoka chronicles how the result of the voting of the 1998 Lambeth Conference was stunning where 526 Bishops voted against gay ordination, 70 voted for it while 45 people abstained from the resolution. The result made the homosexuals who called themselves “New Liberals” to be angry and to start hurling abusive and derogatory terms on the African bishops, describing them as “one step away from witchcraft and their faith superstitious and uninformed.” They were also called “extremists, right-wing fanatics, and fear mongering fundamentalist.”⁴² Since then, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) has been leading other conservative churches in the fight against homosexuality and lesbianism.

One of the imports of this is that the gravity of Christianity has been shifted from the Western world to Africa and other parts of the world. It has also made Akinola and other African church leaders to be subjected to criticism by scholars as well as journalists and human rights activists from the Western world. Ben Anderson, for example, is of the view that Akinola’s condemnation of homosexuality could lead to a split in Africa’s 44 million strong communities. He is however silent on how possible his insinuation is in a country where both religious and cultural traditions are totally against same-sex practice.⁴³

The homosexuality controversy in Nigeria turned a new leaf on Tuesday 29th November, 2011, when the Senate of the country made a bill which promulgated homosexuality and lesbianism in Nigeria. The punishment for offenders or those who support it is 14 year-imprisonment.⁴⁴ The Prime Minister of Great Britain had earlier warned Commonwealth leaders from infringing on the rights of same-sex couples.

Cameron told them that Britain would withdraw her financial aids from any country that violates the rights of gay and lesbian citizens. Cameron's remark attracted harsh reactions from African countries like Ghana and Uganda. While passing the bill, the Nigeria Senate President, David Mark, is noted to have remarked that "it was unnecessary the controversy generated by the bill noting that it is against our culture, traditions and beliefs. Any country who refuses to give aids to Nigeria because of the passage of this bill, should keep it as the practice of same-sex unions remains strange to Nigerian cultural values and practices." The bill, which seeks to punish gays and lesbians in Nigeria who are already faced with discrimination and abuse, is now making its way to the Nigerian House of Representatives who have to approve the bill before it is sent to President Goodluck Jonathan for his signature. This is a clear indication that the Nigerian community is not in support of same-sex practices and it is not ready to change its stance.

It is interesting to note that while South African countries like Namibia and Zimbabwe are utterly against homosexuality, South Africa is one of the most gay-friendly nations in the world. It has been pointed out that about forty of fifty-three African countries outlaw homosexuality.⁴⁵ It is to be noted here that the understanding of sexuality in Nigeria and other African countries is culturally different from what obtains in the Western world where homosexuality and lesbianism, even though controversial, are allowed and legalized. Sexuality is attached to procreation in Africa and no amount of civilization acquired in the continent will be able to change it. Since homosexual and lesbian relationships cannot produce children, it will be very difficult for the practice to be well received by Nigerian people in particular and African people in general.

There have been various calls on African scholars to help change the thinking of Africans about same-sex practice. Citing Amory, Anderson is of the view that there is divergence in the manner by which homosexual issues have been handled by foreign and African scholars. The former are interested in the historical issues relating to same-sex behaviour in Africa while the latter are keen on the contemporary practices of homosexuality in Africa. Amory is of the view that African scholars can influence public opinion on homosexuality by first realizing that gay rights are human rights and not "un-African" and secondly that homophobia represents the lingering imperialism of both colonialism and imported religions.⁴⁶ It is necessary here to state categorically that homosexuality, at least, as it is being practiced in the Western world, is un-African. One cannot also agree

with the fact that homophobia represents the lingering imperialism of both colonialism and foreign religion. African Traditional Religion (ATR) is totally against the practice. In fact, if it were to be before colonialism in Africa when human sacrifice was still a common practice, homosexuals would have been victims in the society. Thus, condemnation of homosexuality and lesbianism was not borne out of homophobia. It was borne out of respect for cultural values. It is our submission that homosexuality and lesbianism cannot be joyfully welcomed in Nigeria and other African countries because of their cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

We have established in this paper the fact that Sodom and Gomorrah and their surrounding cities were not punished because of their inhospitality but because of their sexual perversion and wickedness. Genesis 19 reveals that the people wanted to have sex with the two angels who visited Lot, an action which provoked the angel and led to the blindness of the people of the town and their subsequent destruction. In all the other places where Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, there is no indication that they were accused of inhospitality. They are rather shown as a warning against God’s fierce judgment.

The paper has also been able to trace the trajectories of homosexual controversy in Nigeria, beginning with the role of the former Primate of the Nigerian Anglican Communion, J. P. Akinola who led other evangelical bishops in voting against the legitimization of same-sex union and their ordination in Anglican Communion. It is equally noted that this victory of the Nigerian Anglican Communion is a victory over homosexual practices for the Church as a whole in Nigeria and in Africa. It is important to credit this feat to the Nigerian Church in view of the position of some churches on the ordination of gays and lesbians. For instance, Vermaak recounts how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) makes a distinction between those who have gay and lesbian sexual orientation and those who are involved in same-gender relationship with a decision that while the former can be ordained as ministers in the church the latter could not.⁴⁷ The efforts of the Nigerian Church has been given a boost when the Nigerian law makers, the Upper house, appealing to the traditions and cultural values of the people, outrightly banned and outlawed same-sex practice in Nigeria with a 14 year jail term for anyone caught in the act.

It is, therefore, the submission of this paper that even though the attitude of majority of the Nigerians to homosexuality is that of repulsion, condemnation and rejection, this attitude stems from the fact that such a sexual orientation is foreign to the culture and religious practices of the people. The paper has revealed that both the Church and the society uphold a common position of disapproval to homosexuality in all its forms and operations. They regarded homosexuality as a taboo and as a curse in Nigeria. The effect of the law banning any form of homosexuality in Nigeria is that those who are engaged in the act would not practise it publicly and would do everything possible not to be identified so as to avoid stigmatisation and discrimination from the people and from the society.

Notes and References

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