

“What is written? How do you read?”
Possible guidelines for biblical interpretation

1. Honor the literary and ethical diversity of the Bible.
 - Stories – from histories to parables to narratives of world literature
 - Hymns, prayers, confessions, laments
 - Proclamation, instruction, debate, exhortation
 - Theological principles, symbols, paradigms, mysteries
 - Rules, laws, or guidelines for moral practice and ethical debate

(Celebrate richness. Move beyond treating the Bible simply or primarily as a rule book or a source of “prooftexts.” Faithful readers differ in how far they acknowledge diversity.)
2. Be attentive to culture and experience.

(Attend to experience and to cultural change over time. Ask how a particular social act is embedded in a larger network of social practices.)
3. Value principle over rule.

(When the Bible urges or restricts a particular practice, and contemporary relevance isn’t clear, consider the purpose or rationale in which a practice is grounded.)
4. Read with others: members of faith communities, scholars, interpreters throughout history, including within scripture. *(Treat variety of interpretation as a resource and invitation rather than a threat.)*
5. Acknowledge the “proportion” of the biblical witness - frequency, density, balance. *(When the Bible says little, should we say much? If so, when?)*
6. Value clarity; be cautious with ambiguity.

(If you don’t know what it means, don’t turn it into a rule.)
7. Take seriously legacies of biblical interpretation, especially damaging ones. Read in solidarity with those most affected by powerful interpretations.

(Judge biblical interpretation by what it has done and still does to “the least of these.”)
8. Articulate what deep principles center or ground your interpretation.

(The centrality of Jesus; Love of God and love of neighbor; justice, mercy, righteousness.)

A. How did early Christians interpret Genesis on gender and sexuality?

Genesis 1:27-28

²⁷ So God created humans in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (NRSVUE)

Genesis 2: 18, 23-24

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ... ²³ Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."

²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (NRSVUE)

Galatians 3:28 ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (NRSVUE)

Matthew 19: 3-12

3 Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' 4 He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", 5 and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' 7 They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' 8 He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.'

10 His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' 11 But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.' (NRSVUE)

Mark 12: 18-27

¹⁸Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, ¹⁹“Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁰There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children, ²¹and the second married the widow and died, leaving no children, and the third likewise; ²²none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. ²³In the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had married her.” ²⁴Jesus said to them, “Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵For when people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? ²⁷He is God not of the dead but of the living; you are quite wrong.” (NRSVUE)

Gospel of Thomas 22

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples, "These infants being suckled are like those who enter the kingdom."

They said to him, "Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?"

Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom." (transl. Thomas O. Lambdin)

Gospel of Thomas 114

Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life."

Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

(transl., Thomas O. Lambdin)

B. A story of Abraham, Lot, and the city of Sodom

Genesis 18:1 - 19:29 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on-- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready

quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

[vv. 9-15 – *News is offered that Sarah will bear a son; Sarah laughs*]

¹⁶ Then the men set out from there, and they looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. ¹⁷ The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." ²⁰ Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹ I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know." ²² So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

²³ Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? [*the audacious, suspense-building negotiation continues*] ... ³² Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." ³³ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

^{NRS} Genesis 19:1 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³ But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.

⁴ 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; ⁵ 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." ⁶ Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, ⁷ and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸ 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." ⁹ But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the

door. ¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. ¹² Then the men said to Lot, "Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city-- bring them out of the place. ¹³ For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it."

[vv. 14-26, *The family flees and destruction comes*]

²⁷ Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD; ²⁸ and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the Plain and saw the smoke of the land going up like the smoke of a furnace. (NRSV)

Ancient Interpretations of the Grave Sin of Sodom

Isaiah 1:10-11, 15-17 ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; ¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (NRSV)

Jeremiah 23:14 ¹⁴ But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah. (NRSV)

Ezekiel 16:49-50 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. ⁵⁰ They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. (NRSV)

Matthew 10:14-15 If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (NRSV)

From the rabbis:

Exodus Rabbah 30.19

There was wickedness, there they said: 'Let us deliberately cause the law of hospitality to be forgotten from among us!' [so it is said of Sodom], She did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy" (Ezek 16:49)

Ramban, Genesis XIX, Vayeira

5. "And we shall know them. Their intention was to stop people from coming among them, as our Rabbis have said, for they thought that because of the excellence of their land, which was *as the garden of the Eternal*, many will come there, and they despised charity.... The verse stating, and the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the Eternal exceedingly, really means that they continued provoking and rebelling against Him with their ease and the oppression of the poor. ...

"In the opinion of our Rabbis, all evil practices were rampant among them. Yet their fate was sealed because of this sin – i.e., they did not strengthen the hand of the poor and needy – since this sin represented their usual behavior more than any other.

Besides, since all peoples act righteously towards their friends and their poor, there was none among all the nations who matched Sodom in cruelty.