

What the Bible Says, or Doesn't Say, About Homosexuality

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Introduction

Within Christian circles, the debate about homosexuality has been at the forefront over the past few decades. It is not that this issue was unheard of until recently, but that it was not the focus of so much attention. Much like the civil rights movement and the women's movement, there was no problem as long as those in the GLBT community kept their place within a heterosexist religious system. Only when GLBT persons began to ask for equal rights did the church make it such a hot topic.

The fodder for many of the arguments against homosexuality has been a handful of biblical texts, which have been interpreted historically by modern scholars as condemning of intimate relationships between two persons of the same sex. In fact, some of the more modern translations of the bible contributed to the church's anti-gay teachings (e.g., the *New Revised Standard Version* translation of 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 used the word, "sodomites," to translate a Greek word that had no etymological connection to the town and/or people of Sodom). Most people caught up in the turmoil over the issue have been laity who relied upon their pastors/priests to instruct them on the biblical stance toward homosexuality. Many church leaders have presented their biases without allowing their congregants to study what the bible actually says, or doesn't say about this topic. For example, many persons in the church are still unaware that there is no word for "homosexuality" in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, the three original languages of the bible. In fact, the word did not appear in the English language until the late 19th century. Neither the ancient Israelites nor their later descendants within 1st century Judaism and the early church had any concept of sexual orientation, which is a relatively new concept for us today.

Understanding the historical, sociological, and ideological background of biblical texts is essential in determining both an original meaning as well as a meaning for the modern faith community. Particularly within the community that wrote and passed down the texts of the 1st Testament, the primary concern for Ancient Israel was for survival. The dangers of life in those times meant that their people were constantly on the verge of extinction. Many children did not survive past the age of 2 or 3, and life expectancy was very short, especially for women, who often died in childbirth. Procreation was of the utmost importance. Anything that endangered the possibility for children (e.g., masturbation, non-intercourse sexual activities, etc.) was a threat to the whole community.

During the writing of the New Testament, the early church was also a minority group, but its greatest threat came from the Greek culture, especially their religions, and the threat of assimilation. In trying to prove their legitimacy and carve out their identity, early church leaders, such as Paul, tried to emphasize the sins of Greek religion, especially their incorporation of sexual behavior within their rituals. Anything even closely resembling their behavior (e.g., temple prostitutes, fertility rituals, etc.) was strictly prohibited for the new Christian community.

Given this backdrop for the reading and interpretation of the biblical materials, stories and

passages once thought to condemn many things, homosexuality being one, are seen in a much different light. The threats that existed for Ancient Israel and the early church are not what threaten today's world and church. We face possible extinction not due to lack of procreation but because of over population. The Christian faith is no longer a minority voice, especially in the United States. Just as the biblical texts were written in certain historical contexts, so must we interpret them today, within our own contemporary world.

First/Old Testament Texts

1. Gen 1-2 – “God Created Adam & Eve, not Adam & Steve”

Those who are opposed to the acceptance of GLBT persons and relationships often quote the above statement. Referring back to the two creation stories found in Genesis 1 & 2, this argument claims that heterosexuality was divinely ordained from the beginning of time. This interpretation of the text fails to take into account both the literary and logical aspects of stories of creation. First, one must realize that the point of any good story is to get from one point to the next as smoothly as possible. The creation stories are attempting to explain how all of creation came to be, especially humanity. Based on their understanding of procreation, the ancient writers knew that, to go from two persons to many peoples, God had to start with a female and a male. More specifically, both stories describe the creation of two sexes but not of sexual orientation. In Gen 2, God understands that the first human creature is lonely. Out of a concern for the human creature's need for companionship, God divides 'adam into two parts. The Divine affirms that we all need to be in relationships. Thus, our lives are about finding that which completes us .

2. Gen 19 – The Origin of the Word, “Sodomite/Sodomy”

The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality, not homosexuality. Hospitality was a primary obligation for persons in ancient cultures, especially Israel. The way that the people of Sodom treated the two angelic guests showed their lack of hospitality and their hostility to those who were different from them. Most of the biblical translations of Gen 19 fail to acknowledge that it was the whole community – male & female, young & old – who came to Lot's house and demanded that Lot turn his guests over to them. If anything, the citizens of Sodom intended to commit gang rape. When the reader realizes that it was not just a group of men who demanded to “know” the male visitors, then the possibility of seeing the story as being about homosexual behavior disappears. Interpretation of the story for centuries has been that Sodom & Gomorrah's downfall was: greed, inhospitality, pride, injustice, idolatry, etc (cf, Isa 1:9, 10; 3:9; 13:19; Jer 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Ezek 16:46, 48, 49, 53, 55, 56; Matt 10:15; 11:23-24; Mark 6:11; and Luke 10:12; 17:29). One early rabbinic legend tells of two girls in Sodom. The first girl was starving, so the second girl gave her some flour for making bread. When the people of Sodom found out about this act of generosity, they burned the compassionate girl alive. Only with Augustine in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. did the sin become identified as solely “homosexual” behavior. The Christian tradition's understanding of homosexuality has been most influenced by his views,

while the Jewish tradition has continued to understand the primary sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as being inhospitality.

3. Lev 18:22; 20:13 – “Abominations”

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

20:13 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.

The laws of Leviticus were intended only for Israel. It was a set of laws that were to be kept as a whole, not a buffet from which one could pick and choose. Primary concern was for Israel to remain holy and identifiable from other cultures/faiths. Both texts speak of a man lying with another man as with a woman. No mention of lesbianism. Why not? Again, the concern is for procreation. Male-male sexual relations “wasted seed” as did “masturbation.” Female-female sexual relations did not. Another possibility is that the disgrace here would be that one of the men would have to “play the part of a woman,” which was the greatest humiliation for males in a patriarchal culture.

Much ado has been made about the labeling of male-male sexual activity as an “abomination.” The Hebrew word is *to'ebah*, and it usually has to do with ritual impurity or with idolatry. Perhaps it was related to the prohibition of participation in fertility cults of other cultures. To keep this label in perspective, it is important to consider what other behaviors are called *to'ebah*: wearing polyester/cotton garments or eating foods that contain both meat and dairy products (e.g., cheeseburger).

New Testament Texts

1. Romans 1:26-27 – “unnatural relations”

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for *unnatural*, 27 and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. [NRSV, italics added]

This text is confusing all the way around. Paul is describing what happens to persons of faith who turn to idols and follow other religions. He describes one result of this unfaithfulness in the above verses. The Greek phrase (see italicized word), *para physin*, is better translated as “unconventional” or “unusual”. Paul uses same phrase in 1 Cor 11:14 in referring to men with long hair, something that today we probably do not see as being “sinful.” The behaviors described in this text (i.e., sexual orgies, etc.) probably were connected to practices by Greek religions, which Paul deemed “pagan.” These people were guilty of idolatry, and thus their behavior became unconscionable: adultery, orgies, envy, gossip, etc. In fact, a more obvious problem in the above state of affairs is adultery. Some have even suggested that the text describes more of an orgiastic phenomenon. Both of these would be considered contrary to the

Christian (influenced heavily by Jewish) view of marriage and sexual intimacy.

2. I Cor 6:9-10 – Sin Inventory

⁹Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, *sodomites*,¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers-- none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. [NRSV, italics added]

I Tim 1:9-10 – Another Sin Inventory

⁹This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers,¹⁰ fornicators, *sodomites*, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching. [NRSV, italics added]

The word translated in both passages as, “sodomites,” is the Greek word, *arsenokoitai*, which is hard to translate. Linguistically, the word possibly means “male beds”. It is most often used to mean “male prostitute.” Again, Paul is concerned with pagan religious practices. Many of the most recent translations of the bible have used “homosexuals” or “sodomites.” Even the NRSV, considered by many denominations to be the most accurate translation to date, uses “sodomites” for this word. The previous RSV used “sexual perverts.” Another possibility is that this word, *arsenokotai*, refers to the practice of pederasty (men keeping young boys as sexual slaves), which was a reality in ancient Greek cultures. Both adultery and pederasty would be contrary to God’s will because they objectify human beings.

3. Jude 7 – “Strange Flesh”

Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Given the previous interpretation of the sin of Sodom & Gomorrah as inhospitality, displayed in gang rape, this would certainly be considered sexual immorality, which is referred to in this text. There is nothing said about males having sex with males, nor about females having sex with females. In the time of the writing of Jude, sexual immorality was a broad topic, as it still is today. However, there is no reason to equate this description with homosexual behavior.

Sex-Friendly Texts

Given the dominant use of biblical texts to condemn certain sexual activities, one might wonder if there is any “good news” about sexuality in the bible. One must concede that there are few of these texts in the New Testament. With the influence of Hellenistic culture and the resulting dualism present in Christianity, sex became something unholy, necessary maybe, but not to be encouraged. It was equated with the flesh and thus was seen as being base and not of a higher

spiritual quality. Luckily, though, the Ancient Israelites did not suffer from such dualism and the resultant separation of body and spirit. The human being was seen as a whole. God created us as “fleshy” beings, and thus the body could not be “bad.”

In the 1st Testament, sex is seen as a gift from God and is literally commanded by God of human beings. The words of the Creator to the first humans, “be fruitful and multiply,” are also inherently a command to engage in sexual intimacy. An overwhelming number of the stories in the 1st Testament involve sex in one way or another; for some texts it is the dominant topic. Too many times, the stories involve unhealthy/abusive sexual activity, such as the rape of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 21 or the rape of Bathsheba by King David in 2 Samuel 11-12. Despite all of this, there are some valuable texts in the 1st Testament for the celebration of sexuality, even that of same-sex relationships. Only mention three texts will be presented.

1. Song of Songs

This book is often shocking to the unsuspecting reader. The book consists of nothing but erotic love poetry. No mention is made of God, Israel, covenant, etc. Early Christian biblical interpreters allegorized the text, claiming that it described the relationship between Christ and the Church or between Mary and God. Either way, there are some pretty risqué texts that one must fit into the allegory. Earlier Jewish and contemporary scholars have approached the text as what it is, a vivid description of the love affair between two unwed individuals. The couple in the poem are not married, yet engaged in a sexual relationship. In a few places, the Song of Songs indicates that the couple has to keep their relationship secret and often take risks to be together, because their society does not approve of their being together. People often ask why such a text as Song of Songs is in the canon. It seems very plausible that its inclusion in the canon is due to the Israelites’ understanding of the basic goodness of a healthy sexual relationship and recognized God’s participation in that aspect of their lives as well.

2. Ruth & Naomi

How many of persons have been to a heterosexual wedding and heard these words read or sung:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" [Ruth 1:16-17, **NRSV**]

Many people never stop to think that these are the words Ruth spoke to Naomi, not those of a woman to a man. It seems doubtful that this is something a woman would promise her mother-in-law; no matter how much she loved her husband’s mother. No, the use of these lines in traditional weddings shows that the church (consciously or not) has always understood them to be words of life commitment. Without thought to her own well-being, Ruth chose to go to

Bethlehem with Naomi. Once there, Ruth did all she could to take care of her companion. She even risked her safety to go and glean in the fields alone, so Naomi could have bread. The society, though, required that they have a male, so that the family land could be inherited. Ruth's decision to seduce Boaz into marrying her was also risky. She did it out of her love for Naomi; she was the birth mother for a child that would be raised by both of the women. By the end of the story, after he had done his part, Boaz disappears. The scene is of Naomi, the baby, and the women of the town, and we can assume Ruth. The women, in celebration of Naomi's grandson, proclaim to Naomi that Ruth "your daughter-in-law who loves you, is more to you than seven sons." A similar statement is made by a man to his wife indicating his being "worth more than ten sons" (Elkanah to Hannah in I Samuel 1).

3. David & Jonathon

The bible records that King David of Israel had, among other things, many wives/women. This was the expected behavior of a king, especially to insure a male heir to the throne. David's relationships with women, though, were often troubled and unhealthy. The best relationship recorded for David is that between him and Jonathon, son of David's arch enemy, King Saul. The texts of I & II Sam describe in great detail the interactions between David and Jonathon. Read through non-heterosexist eyes, this is a story of romance. The souls of the two men are described as being "joined together as one." They make a solemn covenant of fidelity to each other. They kissed and wept upon having to be parted. Jonathon is said to have loved David more than his own life. The most obvious, and most difficult to deny, statement of the depth and nature of the love shared between these two men is found in David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathon. In his grief, David states: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (II Samuel 1:26). It appears that the biblical writers/editors were not troubled by this presentation of a deep love between two men, even with one of those men being the great King David.

Conclusions

The most certain statement that can be made is that the bible does not address the same-sex relationships encountered in the church today. Some might even say that the bible is "silent" on this issue. Those who still hold onto the idea that there are texts that condemn homosexuality, must ask themselves if they still support slavery or stoning sassy children (both of which are clearly sanctioned in the bible). Despite their claims that they read scripture for the "plain truth," they have had to do some "interpreting" of their own in the past in order to reject other unjust treatment of human beings.

Another suggestion is that Christians spend more time reading the texts of the 1st Testament and the gospels rather than the Pauline letters. If they did, they would note that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality, but he did speak about judging others and welcoming all of God's children. With new eyes, persons can find, within the 1st Testament texts, a healthy understanding and appreciation of sex.

A Translation of Gen 19:1-11*
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¹The two messengers came to Sodom in the evening, while Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. Then Lot saw and arose to greet them, he bowed his face to the ground. ²Then he said, "Please my lords, turn to the house of your servant, spend the night, and wash your feet. Then you may arise early and be on your way." But they said, "No, in the square we will spend the night." ³He urged them strongly, so they turned to him and came to his house. He made for them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴At evening they lay down, when the people of the city, the people of Sodom from the youngest to the eldest, all the people of Sodom to the last one, surrounded the house. ⁵They called out to Lot and said to him, "Where are the persons who came to you tonight? Bring them out that we may know them." ⁶Then Lot went out to them to the entrance and shut the door after him. ⁷And he said, "Please, my friends, do not do such evil. ⁸Look, I have two daughters, who have not known a man, let me bring them out to you and you do to them whatever you wish, only to these persons do not do anything, for they have come under the shelter of my rafter." ⁹But they said, "Stand back!" Then they said, "This one came as a sojourner and now he would judge us. Now we will do worse to you than them." And they pressed hard against Lot, and they drew near to break the door. ¹⁰But the persons inside reached out their hand and brought Lot to them into the house and shut the door. ¹¹Then, the people who were at the entrance of the house were struck with blindness, the youngest to the eldest, so that they could not find the door.

*Based on the Hebrew of the Masoretic text as found in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

Biblical References to Sodom &/or Gomorrah

First Testament

Genesis

10:19
13:10, 12, 13
14:2, 8, 10-12, 17, 21-22
18:16, 20, 22, 26
19:1, 4, 24, 28

Deuteronomy

29:22
32:32

Isaiah

1:9, 10
3:9
13:19

Jeremiah

23:14
49:18
50:40

Lamentations

4:6

Ezekiel

16:46, 48, 49, 53, 55, 56

Amos

4:11

Zephaniah

2:9

New Testament

Matthew

10:15
11:23-24

Mark

6:11

Luke

10:12
17:29

Romans

9:29

2 Peter

2:6

Jude

1:7

Revelation

11:8

A Few Suggested Resources
For
Sexuality & the Bible¹

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¹ Prepared by Dr. Lisa Davison & Dr. Dennis Smith. This is, by no means, intended to be an exhaustive list of resources.

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