

THE BIBLE AND SAME-SEX RELATIONS:

A REFLECTION ON THE LITERAL MEANINGS OF THE HEBREW AND GREEK TEXTS

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Introduction and Assumptions

Introduction

This paper grew out of a discussion I had with a classmate from high school. Our first several exchanges focused on updating each other on what had happened in the decades since our graduation. Once we discovered that both of us had become Christ-followers, the discussion turned to sharing our respective points of view on a variety of subjects – prayer, spiritual life, the Bible – and eventually to the issue of sexual orientation. My former classmate was surprised to hear that I had a very high view of the inspiration of Scripture, yet favored the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church. He asked if I would mind explaining my thinking on this subject in a plain and straightforward way. This article is my attempt at a response to that request that is rigorous in exegesis but not overly scholarly.

Background and Assumptions

Before I lay out my thoughts on the subject, let me first provide a little background on my own faith journey. I am a Jewish-Christian: a Jewish person who became a follower of Jesus Christ, yet still lays claim to his identity as a one of the children of Israel. This transformation was accomplished, in large part, through the efforts of one of my college friends – a conservative, evangelical, Pentecostal Christian – to show me that Jesus was the fulfillment of my Jewish faith, and also, in larger part, through my failed attempt to employ the Holy

Scriptures to refute that claim. In other words, I came to faith in Jesus Christ because I became convinced of the truth of the Scriptures and his fulfillment of that truth. The Truth of the Scriptures – along with my personal experience of the reality of Jesus Christ – is why I am who I am. I do not take Scripture lightly.

Partly because of my Jewish background and more importantly because I take the Scripture so seriously, when it comes to studying the Scripture, I favor the ancient Jewish method of Biblical analysis and interpretation known as Midrash. Midrash begins with a literal reading of the text, paying close attention to passages that at first glance appear to be contradictory. But rather than denying that these are really contradictions and going to great lengths to prove that they are not (a frequent conservative approach), or using them as an excuse to discount the authority of the passage in question (a frequent liberal approach), Midrash fully recognizes the apparent contradiction on the presumption that God caused them to be placed in the texts when God moved the ancient writers to first record. In other words, it sees them not as true contradictions but rather as paradoxes, and so seeks to understand and interpret them in that way.

So while I found my way into the Christian faith through the conservative “side” of the Church, my theological approach to Christianity is neither conservative nor liberal, but what I call Incarnational. A simple way of explaining this approach is that it always asks the question, “If Christ, then what?” It is what mathematicians would call a “centered set” approach to Christian Community: a hard center (e.g., the reality of the Risen Christ), with little or no definition of boundaries. What makes us Christian is not differentiation from other religions

based on doctrine or practice, but the love of Christ and our orientation toward that love and its Source.

It is an unavoidably Christ-centered approach to Scripture, which takes most literally and seriously of all the words of Christ, using the Truth that is Jesus Christ, revealed in the Gospels, as the lens through which to view the entirety of the rest of the Bible. It is an unavoidably inclusive way of looking at Christian community and Christian unity, because the Jesus' way of being was unmistakably inclusive. He sought and associated himself with all sorts and conditions of unclean and outcast people – tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10; Mark 2:15; Luke 5:29, 15:1), prostitutes (Matt 21:31), the unclean (Luke 9:20), and Gentiles both male (Matt 8:5; Luke 7:2, 17:16) and female (Matt 15:22, Mark 7:26, John 4:7) – apparently without any precondition or prejudice and occasionally with statements of praise for their faith in him (Matt 21:31, 26:10). Perhaps Jesus' most straightforward statement of the inclusiveness of his purpose may be found in his assertion that "If I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32, cf. Luke 3:6). Similarly, radical inclusion based on Christ's love was central to the teaching and practice of Paul (Gal 3:28; Rom 5:18, 11:32; 1 Cor 15:22; Col 1:20; Php 2:11) and other Apostles (Acts 8:26-40, 10:1-48, 15:1-41), and was integral to the Way of Paul's early Christian communities.

What is more, in his parables, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that human beings are singularly poor judges not only of the state of other people's relationships with God but also of our own (Matt 25:31-46). And because of this shortcoming we are warned against trying to sort out who is for God and who is against, leaving that discernment to God (Matt 13:18-33), and contenting ourselves with fulfilling God's Law by obeying God's two most challenging

commandments: to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:25-28).

Therefore, when the question presented for Biblical analysis is the inclusion or exclusion of any group of human beings, the default position must be that the group must be included unless a clear, convincing, and indisputable Biblical case, rooted in and consistent with our understanding of Jesus Christ, can be demonstrated for their exclusion, either in whole or in part. In other words, the burden of proof lies on those who would exclude rather than those who would include. So keeping in mind that opposition to the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the church is not monolithic, we begin by examining the Biblical case for exclusion of gay and lesbian people from participation in the life of the Church, either completely or in part.¹

Examining the Case for Exclusion of Gay and Lesbian People from Full Participation in the Life of the Church

The Biblical Case for Exclusion

Biblical authorities, regardless of their particular opinion on the issue, agree that those opposed to same-sex relations construct their Biblical case for against unconditional inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church on the following texts:

- **Genesis 19** (The story of Sodom and Gomorrah)
- **Judges 19:14-29** (The story of Gibeah)
- **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13** (“...it is an abomination.”)
- **Romans 1** (“...God has given them up to vile affections, [including]...”)

¹ Only a small minority advocate for the full *exclusion* of gay and lesbian people from all aspects of the life of the church. Most include them in some aspects (e.g., fellowship), while excluding them from others (e.g., marriage), or will fully include them but only under certain conditions (e.g., celibacy).

- **1 Corinthians 6** (“...the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God, [including]...”)
- **1 Timothy 1** (“the lawless and the disobedient...[including]”)²

The question before us is whether these passages constitute an irrefutable case against inclusion.

Frequency and Emphasis

A necessary (though not sufficient) way to begin to answer these questions is to ask how frequently and consistently theme appears. Is it referenced in all (or most) of the books of the Bible? If not, in which/which kinds of books? By whom and to whom?

In the case of same-sex sexual activity, the answers are fairly enlightening. Out of the 66 books, 1,100+ chapters, and roughly 31,000 verses of the Bible, six or seven mentions in six of those books is a relatively light footprint, especially when you consider that none of these passages are from the Gospels, none are spoken by Jesus, and half of the Hebrew Scripture passages are from the commandments of Levitical “holiness code,” which the vast majority of Christian’s do not practice today.

It is a pretty thin slice of the Scriptures on which to rest an argument excluding an entire category of humanity from full participation in the life of the Church. This becomes especially obvious when you consider that vast number.

But statistics, while instructive, do not theological arguments make. We need to more closely examine the Biblical texts on which the proposed exclusion of gay and lesbian people rests.

² Biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

What Did Jesus Say?

To view this question through the lens of Jesus Christ, we first have to ask whether we have any evidence of Jesus speaking unambiguously on the issue. And the answer is “No.”

Jesus is silent on the issue of gay and lesbian sexual activity. Jesus says nothing about same-sex attraction or behavior, either directly in favor of or opposed to it. Those who oppose unconditional inclusion would likely point out that Jesus’ silence, in-and-of itself, is not evidence of his opinion in the matter. And they would be right, if that was the only evidence we had.

Yet Jesus does address sexual immorality. While Jesus is silent on same-sex sexuality, he was not shy about addressing issues of sexual immorality:

- “Evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are things that defile” (Matt 15:18-20);
- “Tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt 21:28-32);
- “Go and sin no more” [to the woman caught in adultery] (John 8:3-11).

Jesus also addresses heterosexual marriage. Speaking against the ease with which men were able to divorce their wives, leaving them destitute and without hope of supporting themselves, save begging or prostitution, Jesus said “So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:6ff, cf. Mark 10:8). Given the context (answering the Pharisees’ question about divorce), it is more accurate to say that Jesus is primarily speaking against divorce and secondarily speaking for marriage.

How do we interpret Jesus' silence on same-sex sexual activity? While Jesus' comments on heterosexual immorality and marriage are secondary considerations to the issue of same-sex sexual activity, the fact that he does deal with issues of heterosexual immorality are significant to the extent that it demonstrates that he did not avoid teaching about sexual or moral issues, or responding to questions about them. Therefore, regarding Jesus' silence on same-sex sexuality, the following conclusions, in what I would consider to be decreasing likelihood, are open to us:

- Jesus did not consider it a sin,
- Jesus did not consider it a significant sin (more like a minor infraction),
- Jesus did consider it a significant sin, but neglected to mention it, or
- Jesus did consider it a significant sin, and said so, but the Gospel writers omitted it.

Those opposing unconditional inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church might also respond that Jesus did not address same-sex relations because they were not common in Jewish social life (whereas the Apostle Paul, for example, who was a Roman citizen and whose ministry to the predominantly gentile population of Roman Empire, in which same sex relations was not taboo, would have been confronted it more often³). But this objection also does not hold up under closer scrutiny, because while same-sex relations were not commonly practiced in the Jewish culture of the time, the fact of Israel's ongoing temptation to engage in ritual same-sex relations as a form of appeasement offering to the indigenous fertility

³ Cf. Marilyn B. Skinner (2013), *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; Thomas J. Hubbard (2014), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

religions would have been common knowledge, and thus Jesus would at least have been able to condemn them in that context, had he so desired.

So while we cannot completely rule out the possibility that Jesus had a negative opinion of same-sex sexuality, we can unequivocally state that he had numerous opportunities to do so, without any evidence that he ever did so.

What did Moses say?

The heading above probably should have been “What do the Hebrew Scriptures say?” but I’m a sucker for parallelism. We now turn to the four passages of the Hebrew Scriptures offered as part of the case against same-sex sexuality:

- **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13** (“...it is an abomination.”)
- **Genesis 19** (The story of Sodom and Gomorrah)
- **Judges 19:14-29** (The story of Gibeah)

Leviticus 18:22 (and 20:13)

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”

“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.”

Context Changes Connotations. These two verses from the book of Leviticus are among the half-dozen passages offered as proof that same-sex sexual activity is abhorrent to God. Reading these verses for the first time, without the context of the surrounding verses, one could certainly be forgiven for reading them as straightforward condemnations of same-sex sexual activity.

However, when one considers the historical-cultural and Scriptural contexts of the passages their connotations begin to seem quite different. The historical-cultural context makes it clear that a major thrust of the teaching found in Leviticus is to dissuade the people of Israel from adopting the Pagan practices of the peoples among whom they lived. The Scriptural context also makes this clear. First, the texts in question are found within the Levitical “Holiness Code,” which is primarily concerned with ritual cleanliness requirements for the Levitical priesthood, and to a lesser degree for those who would participate in worship and sacrifice at the Jerusalem Temple. Second, of the two chapters in which these verses are found, chapter 18 contains the most detailed and exhaustive list of prohibitions of the two, while chapter 20 seems to be a summary of offenses and punishments. Thus, chapter 18 provides the best context.

Examining Leviticus 18:22 in the context of the entirety of chapter 18, there are several indications that this verse is not a broad condemnation of same-sex sexual activity, per se:

Non-Apodictic Form. Divine commandments found in the Hebrew Scriptures take either of two forms: *apodictic* or *casuistic*. Apodictic commands, such as the Ten Commandments, are limited in number, but absolute and general in scope, applying to all people in all situations for all time. Casuistic commands, on the other hand, are contextual and case specific, applying to some groups of people, in some situations, or for a limited time, but appear in the Scripture in greater numbers. The Levitical “Holiness Code” and rules for sacrifice are but two of many examples. When apodictic commands apply to both men and women, they are written in a form which is either gender-neutral (e.g., “You shall not kill”) or contains parallel prohibitions for males and females (e.g., nocturnal emissions make males ceremonially unclean, while menstrual flows make females ceremonially unclean).

If Leviticus 18:12 were intended as an apodictic command against all same-sex activity, by both sexes, for all time, it would have been constructed differently: either as a single, general command against all same-sex sexual activity (omitting the male-with-male reference), or containing parallel prohibitions for both sexes (adding a prohibition against female-with-female sexual activity). Reading this text literally and assuming it is a prohibition against same-sex sexual activity, we can only interpret this as prohibiting male-male sex but permitting female-female sex. As this seems an unlikely interpretation, we must assume that it is not a prohibition against same-sex activity, per se, but rather a prohibition against some other kind of activity, which happens to include a sexual component.

So we are left to ask whether the context provides any clues to the actual prohibition, which in fact it does:

Cultic Prohibitions. Leviticus 18 actually contains two distinctly different sections of prohibitions (chapters, verses, and punctuations as we know them did not exist in the original scrolls). The first half of the chapter deals with sexual practices forbidden by reasons of incest (Lev 18:6-18), ritual uncleanness (Lev 18:19), or adultery (Lev 18:20), none of which are specifically labeled as abominations.

At this point in the chapter, the focus of the prohibitions shifts dramatically. Leviticus 18:21 is an unambiguous non-sexual condemnation of child-sacrifice to the false God Molech. This is followed with the male-male sexual prohibition of verse 22 (“and-with a-man | lie-down you-shall-not | as-lies-down | a-woman | abomination|it-is”), and a prohibition of sex with sacrificial animals by males or females in verse 23. All three of these prohibitions are individually and specifically labeled as direct offences against God. Child sacrifice, male-male

temple prostitution, and sexual relations with sacrificial animals were relatively common practices in the pagan temples of the lands in which the Israelites lived and in the temples of Molech, specifically. Members of the cult of Molech apparently believed that these practices would enhance their own fertility, as well as that of their wives, their herds, and their crops.

While this seems the strongest argument against these texts being a blanket condemnation of same-sex relations in all circumstances, it is not the only argument. Others have offered somewhat different explanations of the peculiar construction of these verse, but even those agree that these texts are not a broad condemnation of same-sex relations, per se.⁴

Conclusion: Pagan Sexual Fertility Rites, Not Same-Sex Activity, Per Se, Are Condemned.

It seems clear that the abomination described in Leviticus 18:22 is not same-sex sexual relations, per se, or even male-male sexual relations, per se, but rather a sexual form of worship of false Gods. Rather, this seems to be literally a prohibition against a male Israelite to participate in anal sex with a temple prostitute as the penetrator. What is condemned here, then, is not same-sex activity, per se, but rather sexual activity applied to the worship of Pagan gods, of which all forms of worship, sexual or otherwise, are forbidden. Those Bibles which do translate Leviticus 18:22 as a condemnation of homosexuality (e.g., *The Living Bible* "Homosexuality is absolutely forbidden, for it is an enormous sin") or homosexual activity (e.g., *The New Living Translation* – "Do not practice homosexuality; it is a detestable sin") are literally incorrect.

Genesis 19:5

⁴ Jacob Milgrom (2000), *Leviticus 17-22 (The Anchor Bible series)*, New York: Doubleday.

“The men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; 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.”

The story of the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is also frequently offered as proof of God’s abhorrence of same-sex sexuality, assuming that the offence of the men of those towns was their demand to be allowed to engage in same-sex intercourse with the apparently male angels that had come to rescue Lot and his family (Gen 19:5). It is on this assumption that the name of the town of Sodom was preserved in the terms “sodomy” and “sodomite,” respectively, as names for same-sex sexual activity and for those who engage in it. Etiologically, the term “sodomite” originally simply meant an inhabitant of the city of Sodom (located somewhere on the plains of Canaan). Later, it became a legal term to refer to criminal sexual acts. Today, its prevailing use is as a slur against gay people.

To ascertain whether this passage is indeed the condemnation of same-sex sexuality that its proponents claim it to be, we have to reexamine the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Actually, we have to reexamine the story of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, since God’s wrath is said to have caused four Canaanite cities to be destroyed for their offences against God (Deut 29:22-29). Interestingly, when their offences are recounted in this later book, the reason given is not their practice of same-sex sexual activity, but rather “because they forsook the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Deut 29:25). Similarly, the book of the prophet Ezekiel (16:49-50), in its explanation of the reason for the destruction of the twin cities, makes no mention of same-sex

relations. Rather, the prophet states that they were condemned because in their prosperity they became prideful and did not aid the poor and hungry among them.

The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah begins in Genesis 18, when God and two angels meet with Abraham and Sarah to inform them that the four cities, along with all of their inhabitants, would be completely destroyed for their abominations, and to give them time to rescue Abraham's nephew Lot. In response to this news, Abraham barter with God over the fate of the cities, persuading God to spare the cities, if at least ten or more "righteous people" are found in Sodom.

The story continues in chapter 19 as the two angels move on to Sodom and appear to Lot, who welcomes them into his house, where they warned him to flee because God's planned destruction of Sodom and the surrounding towns and their residents because of their wickedness. Meanwhile, the men of the town, likely on high alert and suspicious of aliens because of recent warfare (Gen 14:1-2), quickly discover the presence of the angels (whom they presume to be men), gather in a mob (including their women and children) around Lot's home, and demanded that Lot turn the angels over to them so they could have sexual relations with them. Lot tries to placate the mob by offering to let them gang-rape his barely teenage daughters instead (hardly a moral act in itself), but the men refuse, the angels blind them, Lot escapes with his family (though his wife is turned to salt when she turns to look back), and Sodom and the surrounding cities are destroyed.

Defects in the Sodom and Gomorrah Homosexuality-as-Abomination Argument

The argument of those who would exclude gay and lesbian people from full participation in the life of the Church is that Sodom and the surrounding cities were destroyed because its

people either engaged in or approved of homosexual behavior, and that it proves that such behavior is abominable to God then and now. But there are several defects in this argument, which make it unconvincing:

The presence of women and children in the mob. It seems highly unlikely that if the motive of the men of Sodom was simply to engage in homosexual sex with the angels that they would have brought along their women and children to observe their orgy. Nor does it seem likely that the women and children would have participated in calling for the angels to be sent out if simple male-male sex was what the crowd was demanding. Their presence and participation makes no sense unless some other dynamic was at work here.

Lot's offering his virgin daughters. Since Lot had himself been a resident of Sodom for many years, we have to assume that Lot would have some sense of the sexual orientation of the men of his city, and would have known that the men who wanted to have sex with the angels were gay, and thus only interested in male-male sexual gratification. In the context of this awareness, Lot's offer of his virgin daughters to the men for sexual purposes makes little sense unless he knew that the men were heterosexual.⁵

Conclusion: A More Reasonable Explanation of the Sodom and Gomorrah Story

Male-on-Male Rape to Humiliate Enemy Warriors. There is an explanation for the story that accounts for the above inconsistencies, and yet does not require the conclusion that God destroyed Sodom and the other cities because of the "abomination" of homosexuality. Male-

⁵ The reader must understand that introducing concepts such as "sexual orientation" into a discussion of sexual behavior in antiquity is highly problematic. In the ancient world, same-sex relations had little to do with a person's sexual preferences, but primarily with property rights and domination. Men didn't have to be "gay" to engage in same-sex relations. If a man owned you, he had the right to penetrate you. Dividing the world into heterosexual and homosexual is a relatively modern bifurcation, and discussing sexual mores in those terms is simply anachronistic.

on-male rape (by heterosexual men) was a common way in which people in those days and even today humiliate conquered enemy warriors. The fact that Sodom recently had been under attack by foreigners lends credence to this explanation, especially if they perceived the angels as foreign, which seems likely. It also explains the presence of women in the crowd and their participation in the call for the angels to be brought out. What is more, according to the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures, homosexual rape would have been just as abominable to God as heterosexual rape. And one would have to suppose that the rape of angels (God's holy messengers) would be the ultimate abomination in rape.

The Bible Itself Contradicts an Exclusionary Reading of the Text. It should be noted when the prophet Ezekiel reflects on the moral meaning of the destruction of the Twin Cities, he maintains that the reason God "removed" Sodom and Gomora was because "they had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Same-sex relations is not given as the reason for destroying them. In fact, same-sex relations is not mentioned in the text at all.

Judges 19:22

"The men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him."

Another passage frequently employed to make the case that same-sex sexuality is an abomination is the story of Gibeah.

This passage from the book of Judges tells a story similar to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. A Levite and his concubine travelling through the countryside are unable to find

hospitality in the town of Gibeah, until an old man comes in from the fields and offers to let them spend the night in his home, so they don't have to risk sleeping in the town square. Later that night, the men of Gibeah demand that the old man give his guest over to them that they might have forcible intercourse with him. After failing to dissuade them from their demands, the Levite offers his concubine in his place, and the men of Gibeah violently rape her all night long, after which she dies on the steps of the old man's house. Later, the Levite cuts her body into pieces, which he sends to the tribes of Israel demanding vengeance. Then the tribes of Israel assemble, surround Gibeah, and destroy the town and all that reside within because of the abomination they committed.

Conclusion: A Similar Story with Similar Defects

Just as the Gibeah story echoes the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the argument that it implies God's condemnation of same-sex activity contains similar (albeit more defective) defects. In the Gibeah story, the actions of the men are clearly in violation of God's requirement that the people of Israel show hospitality to the stranger in their midst. And in the Gibeah story it is even clearer that the men involved were heterosexuals who desired to humiliate a stranger and potential enemy through same-sex rape, since they were equally pleased to gang rape a woman.

What did Paul say?

In the New Testament, there are three passages that have been employed to argue that gay and lesbian relationships are detestable to God. None are from the Gospels or the words of Jesus. All three are from the letters of the Apostle Paul:

- **Romans 1:26-27** (“Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men...committed shameless acts with men...”)
- **1 Corinthians 6:9-10:** (“...Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”)
- **1 Timothy 1:9-10** (“...the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient,...for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers ...)

As with the Hebrew Scripture texts previously examined, when read in isolation and without context, these appear to be condemnations of gay and lesbian sexual activity. However, when read in context and when the original meanings of the words are thoroughly explored, the argument that these texts condemn such activity again fails to convince.

Romans 1:26-27

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse or unnatural, 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.”

This passage from Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome is the linchpin in the case for the exclusion of gay and lesbian people from full participation in the life of the Church, partly because it is the only verse of Scripture that mentions female-female sexual behavior, and partly because it appears to condemn even same-sex sexual orientation.

As with most of the content of Paul's letters to the churches he shepherded and the pastors he pastored, a correct understanding of these passages requires careful study. Because they are correspondence, they are by their very nature contextual and incomplete, i.e., we have only half of the correspondence. And in addition, as the Apostle Peter noted, Paul was not one to give simple questions to complex issues.⁶

Word Meanings in Romans 1:26-27

Degrading Passions (Grk. *atima pathos*). Many modern versions of the Bible translate this phrase as “degrading passions” or “vile lusts.” However, *atima* literally means “without honor” (i.e., dishonorable or shameful). And “pathos,” as most of us know, does not describe sexual yearning as we know them, but rather an appeal to the emotional experience of an audience. It seems much more likely that Paul was referring heightened and sometimes drug induced emotional/sexual state that accompanied the ritual sexual orgies of the Pagan fertility cults that were prevalent in first century Rome.

Exchanged (Grk. *metalasso*) and abandoned (Grk. *aphiemi*). The literal meaning of both of these words – “setting aside” and “leaving behind” – are significant to understanding this passage, because both imply an intentional departure from something they normally possess or someone with whom they are normally in relationship. It seems clear that Paul is talking here about heterosexually-oriented women and men – perhaps because of drugs or the pressure of the “worshipping” group – setting aside/leaving behind their usual heterosexual behavior in order to engage in same-sex sexual behavior.

⁶ 2 Pet 3:15-16 – “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”

Natural (Grk. *phusikan*) and Unnatural (Grk. *para phusin*). The literal meanings of these words are “inborn” (or “conventional” or “according to one’s nature”) and “alongside inborn” (or “unconventional” or “not according to one’s nature”). Also modifier *para* (lit. “alongside” or “next to”) implies neither positive nor negative value (e.g., in Romans 11:34, Paul uses the words *para phusin* in a positive sense to describe how in Christ God has grafted together Jews and Gentiles “against human nature”). Therefore, it seems likely that in the above passage, Paul is not condemning same-sex sexual behavior, *per se*, but rather acting against one’s nature in any manner.

Error (Grk. *playnah*). This word literally means “wandering” or “turning away” and elsewhere is almost always used to describe turning away from relationship with God.

A More Accurate Translation. A more accurate translation of the Romans 1:26-27 might read something like this:

"For this reason God gave them over to the hypersexual emotional states that accompanied their dishonorable rituals. Thus, their women set aside their natural inborn sexual orientation and participated in intercourse that was against their natural orientation. And in the same way also the men, abandoning their natural inborn orientation to intercourse with women, were consumed with the same ritually-induced hypersexual desire for one another, dishonoring themselves by their actions with each other, and received in their own persons the due penalty for their wandering."

Conclusion: Pagan Worship, Not Same-Sex Behavior is an Abomination to God

If I am correct in these translations, what is at issue here for Paul is not the same-sex sexual act, *per se*, but that people who had been Christ followers had turned from worship Christ to

worship false gods in indecent orgies which required them to act against their inborn sexual orientation. This conclusion is borne out by the context of these verses.

Romans 1:26-27 in Context. Taken in context, it becomes even clearer that these verses are not condemnations of same-sex orientation or behavior, per se, but rather a condemnation of Christ followers turning away from Christ to the worship and indecent rituals of false gods.

Examining preceding and following verses makes it clear that:

- The people in question were erstwhile Christ-followers who had turned away from faith in Christ and returned to Pagan worship (vss. 21-23);
- Which led to their engaging in heterosexual orgies as part of ritual fertility rites (vs. 24);
- Which led to their worshipping images (i.e., idol worship) that they created with their own hands, rather than worshipping the Creator who made them (vs. 25);
- Because of which God confused their fertility sex-rites, so that women and men set aside their inborn sexual orientations and engaged in same-sex sexual acts in their ritual orgies (vss. 26-27);
- And then, because they did not come to their senses and recognize their Creator, God “gave them over” all sorts of depravity, including wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, God-hating, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, the inventing of evil, rebelliousness toward parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness.
- And all because they knew that these things led to death but did them anyway and encouraged others to do them, too.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Word Meanings in 1 Corinthians 6:-9-10

Two words in this passage which are sometimes used interchangeably with the term “homosexual” are the words “male prostitutes” and “sodomites.” So in this case, the argument that God abhors same-sex sexual activity, per se, rests on whether or not these words are accurately translated, which they most likely are not. The Greek language commonly employed a different term to describe sex between men. This word is *pederaste*, from which we get the terms “pederast” and “pederasty.” The other two words appear to mean something different.

Male prostitutes (Grk. *malakoi*). This word refers to boy sex-slaves, who were sexually abused by older, otherwise heterosexual males.

Sodomites (Grk. *arsenokoitai*). This word appears to refer to men who sexually abuse other men. It appears nowhere else in Scripture or even in other Greek manuscripts of the period, except in Paul’s first letter to the Church in Corinth and in his first letter to Timothy. In fact, many think that it was a word that Paul constructed for the occasion (something which Paul was wont to do from time to time). David Garland, in his commentary of 1 Corinthians affirms this understanding of the text, pointing out that in the ancient world, according to

contemporaneous writers, the act of penetration in male-male sexual relations had nothing to do with love or sexual attraction, but about demonstrating dominance over a weaker party.⁷

Is Lesbian sex okay with God? Just as in the Leviticus passage referenced earlier, it is worth noting that female-female sex is not mentioned here. So unless the passage is referring to something other than same-sex sexual activity, we are left with the inescapable impression that God hates gay males and gay male sex, but may have no objection to Lesbians and Lesbian sex.

Conclusion: Abusive Sexual Relationships, Not Same-Sex Activity, is Condemned

Yet again, the argument that God condemns same-sex sexual relationships and commands us to exclude the gay and lesbian people who participate in them falls short. What appears to be condemned in this passage is not same-sex activity but abusive sexual relationships.

1 Timothy 1:9-10

“This 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, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

Conclusion: Another Mistranslation

Similar to the case in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, in this verse the exclusionary argument rests on the meaning of the single term often translated as “homosexual” or “sodomite.” As before, this is a mistranslation of the word *arsenokoitai*, which literally means “men who abuse men

⁷ David E. Garland, “1 Corinthians,” in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003, 217–213. Garland also notes that neither did the weaker party receive sexual enjoyment, understanding that to do so meant he enjoyed being dominated, which was deemed shameful.

sexually.” If Paul wanted to clearly state that he was referring to male-male sexual relations, he would have used the term *pедераiste*.

Summary and Conclusion

There are many factors that color the way we interpret Scripture. Every unexamined assumption that we bring to our examination of Scripture threatens to undermine our objectivity, predisposing us to see what we expect to see rather than what is actually there. Of all these untested assumptions, our cultural assumptions are perhaps the hardest to recognize. They have become our paradigms of the way things work: the unnoticed lenses through which we view everything. Sometimes they clarify our perceptions, but more often they distort them. Indeed, any attempt to anachronistically inject modern views of sexual orientation (pro or con) into a discussion of either Ancient Jewish practices (Leviticus), 1st century Jewish practices (the Gospels), or Mediterranean Hellenistic society (the Epistles) is extremely problematic, in that the world views of all three were vastly different. Even those who hold that Paul did, in fact, condemn same-sex relations agree that this is the case.⁸ Preference for the simplest and most literal reading of the (modern English) text, while understandable, is simply not possible. Giving in to that preference is neither simple nor literal, since any translation of Scripture into a new vernacular, passes the original words through the cultural and paradigmatic filters of that language.

Earlier I mentioned several reasons I prefer the Midrashic approach to the study of Scripture. Another reason is this: by taking a more literal, yet paradoxical approach to our explorations, we are forced to question our assumptions and open our eyes to understandings

⁸ Cf. David E. Garland (2003).

outside the blinders imposed by our cultural-bound expectations. Equally important to a obtaining a clearer vision of Scripture is being sure we are examining it through the right lens – and there is no better lens available to than the Gospels: specifically, the words and actions of our incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ. When we begin our Scriptural study of the issue of gay and lesbian inclusion there, rather than in the laws of Leviticus or the letters of Paul, the view is quite different.

A former mentor of mine, Verna Dozier, once quipped that “whenever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, pretty soon they will try to figure out how to exclude a fourth.” The Church’s perennial problem is that it has more often than not placed the burden of argument on those currently excluded to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that God wants them included. However, given the radical inclusiveness of Christ’s ministry, it is clear that the burden of proof should rest on those who advocate exclusion. And to put it plainly, the Scriptural arguments against the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people fail to rise above a “reasonable doubt” threshold. They are based on a relative handful of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the New Testament. None of them are taken from the Gospels or the words of Jesus Christ. Most of them are either mistranslated or taken out of context. When examined in context and properly translated, a strong case can be made that none of them has to do with same-sex sexual relations, per se, but rather with offenses against God. This does not constitute a convincing argument for the exclusion of gay and lesbian people from full participation in the life of the Church.

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