



Homosexuality and the Bible

AN OVERVIEW OF THE
RELEVANT PASSAGES

Genesis 1-2

By approaching the Creation Myth in Genesis as prescriptive, rather than descriptive, interpreters find here a “creation order” pattern for all human relationships.

What should be obvious, however, is:

1. Only a heterosexual procreative relationship would make sense in a creation story like this.
2. There are many types of human relationships that are not mentioned here at all: friendship, celibacy, etc. It is not a determinative guide for all human interactions.

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

Jewish scholars did not associate the sin of Sodom and Gomorra with homosexuality until Philo in the first century C.E. – and not with any measure of consistency until the sixth century C.E.

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

Only since the Middle ages have Christian theologians viewed this text as a blanket condemnation of homosexuality.

1508 C.E.– Wycliff translation of the Bible into Middle English used “synn of Sodom” for *arsenokoites* (the word Paul uses in I Cor 6 and I Tim 1 that has been subsequently translated “homosexuals” – see NIV).

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

A close reading of Genesis 19 reveals that the situation was one of gang rape – a means of humiliating foreigners and those taken captive during war.

This practice was not driven by sexual desire, but by hatred of enemies – this is a story about mob violence, not homosexual desire.

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

The influence of the Medieval tradition of seeing homosexual acts condemned here can be seen in the NIV translation of Genesis 19:4:

“Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom – both young and old – surrounded the house.”

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

In the Hebrew and LXX versions of the Genesis 19 story, the term for “men of the city” is actually inclusive of all the people – men and women alike. “All of the people” is a more accurate translation.

Even if the mob were entirely comprised of men, are we to believe that ALL of the inhabitants of the city were homosexuals?

How does Lot offering his daughters to be raped by people he knows make sense if they are all homosexuals? He is, instead, attempting to assuage their violent intentions towards his guests.

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

If the men of Sodom had clamored to have sex with two female angels, do you think that this text would be interpreted as a blanket condemnation of heterosexual sex? Not likely.

Instead, we would conclude (rightly) that the sin of the people of this city was that they wished to sexually violate two strangers in their midst.

Sodom and Gomorra – Genesis 19

There are nearly twenty references to the Sodom story in subsequent Scriptural texts – NONE of them refer to homosexuality as the great sin of these cities.

See Duet 29:23, 32:32; Ezekiel 16:49-50; Isa 1:9-17, 3:9; Jer 23:14, 49:18, 50:40; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9

Jesus considers the sin of Sodom to be inhospitality and arrogance: Luke 10:8-12. By this metric, many conservative Christians are “Sodomites” in their regard for LGBT people.

Addendum to Sodom and Gomorra – Jude 7

Some claim that the reference to Sodom and Gomorra in Jude 7, which reads “giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh” is a reference to homosexuality.

At the time the book of Jude was written, many believed that the women of Sodom had engaged in intercourse with male angels. See the reference to this occurrence in Genesis 6:1,2,4 where the “sons of God” (angels) took the “daughters of men” as wives. Their offspring were the Nephilim – monstrous and gigantic humanoids. This is what Jude is referring to: sex with angels – not homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

The context of both of these rules is specified in Leviticus 18:2-3, 24; 20:23: they are meant to keep the Israelites, during a period of nation-building, from “doing what the Egyptians and Canaanites did.”

As all references to same-sex erotic behavior found in Scripture – this is a context of idolatry, where Jewish abhorrence of polytheism and paganism views a sex act only in that context.

Leviticus 18 and 20

Canaanite religion often included fertility rites where entire families would engage in sex acts to procure the blessing of a god or goddess.

Moreover, the *assinu* (Temple priests of Astarte/Ishtar) received a “deposit” within their bodies that would function as a guarantee for fertility and immortality.

Leviticus 18 and 20

In Canaanite and Egyptian religion, homosexual temple prostitution was part of their ritual expression of devotion to deities. Lev 20 mentions, more specifically, the worship of Molech – including a long list of sexual practices common to cultic ritual worship of him.

The context of these verses must inform our interpretation and application of them: that of pagan religious ritual.

“A text taken out of context is a pretext.”

Romans 1

The rhetorical purpose of this section needs to be noted: Paul is setting a rhetorical trap adapting text from the Wisdom of Solomon to paint a picture of “typical Gentile excess.” He springs this trap in 2:1 ... “you who judge do the same things!”

Once again, however, the context of this passage has to do with idolatry.

Romans 1

Paul is painting a picture of people who:

1. Refuse to acknowledge and glorify God (v. 21).
2. Began worshipping idols (v. 23).
3. Were more interested in earthly pursuits than spiritual ones (v. 25).
4. Went beyond their “natural” desire in an unbounded search for pleasure (v. 26-27).
5. Lived lives full of covetousness, malice, envy, strife, slander, disrespect for parents, pride, and hatred of God (v. 29-31).

Romans 1

The model of same sex erotic behavior Paul was addressing here is explicitly associated with idol worship and with people who give way to an unbridled search for pleasure (where homosexual sex is having “too much” passion – not an orientation).

Romans 1

vv. 26-27 - Paul says they “gave up” natural relations – i.e., they were “naturally” attracted to people of the opposite sex, but filled with lust and “dishonorable passions.”

Paul is not talking about people who have a natural attraction to the same sex. We have no idea whether that concept ever entered his mind – or whether a Jew could be gay in his thinking, since he solely associates it with idol worship.

Romans 1

“It is not clear that Saint Paul distinguishes, as we must, between homosexual persons and heterosexual persons who behave like homosexuals, but what is clear is that what is ‘unnatural’ is the one behaving after the manner of the other.”

- Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*.

I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:8-10

The words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitos* found in these texts create the problem for modern interpreters.

malakoi – sometimes translated “effeminate” (viewed as a reference to a gay man). The Greek word is quite broad, and carries with it the notion of a “soft person” – i.e., being “soft like a woman” – lazy, degenerate, decadent, and having a lack of courage. Paul is condemning men who were vain, fearful, and self-indulgent.

This kind of misogynistic thinking was common in antiquity.

I Corinthians and I Timothy

The KJV translated the Greek word *arsenokoitos* as “abusers of themselves with mankind” – and this meaning has affected many subsequent English translations of the Bible.

Arsenokoitos is a *hapex legomenon* in the New Testament – no texts before Paul evidence the use of this word.

I Corinthians and I Timothy

Translators see the compound word created by

Arseno – Male

Koitai – to bed

This means of finding the meaning of a word is problematic. Without context, what would scholars think of our use of the word “lay killer” or “it’s raining cats and dogs”?

I Corinthians and I Timothy

Looking at how the word was used in Greek literature (73 times in literature in the following six centuries after Paul – so very infrequently) – the general patten of its use indicates that it refers to those who find ways to exert abusive power over others. Perhaps a male who acts in a sexually violent way against another male.

In I Tim. The word appears between fornicators and slave traders

The NIV translates this word “homosexual offender” – assuming that the person here must use homosexuality in an aggressive or offensive way.

Conclusions

1. Ancient views of sex involved a gender hierarchy that saw those “penetrated” as in a state of dishonor. Ancient views of woman informed much of what we read about same-sex erotic behavior in the literature of that time.
2. Every text that mentions same sex erotic behavior – in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures – views that behavior in the context of idolatry. It is unclear if they had any concept of such activity outside of the context of idol worship.

Conclusions

3. There was no concept of “sexual orientation” until the Nineteenth Century – so to read what we refer to as “homosexuality” back into Scripture is eisegesis and anachronistic.

4. We have no idea what Paul or other biblical authors would say about the spectrum of sexuality evidenced in humanity given their commitment to Jewish “creation order” theology.

Conclusions

5. It is the job of the Church to interpret Scripture in the way that promotes honesty, love, inclusion, and health for all people. Interpretations that lead to loneliness, disenfranchisement, hatred, and death cannot be accepted as part of the gospel trajectory.