

A Note: This piece is meant to be an aid to those within the lay community who wish to gain further clarity or insight over the topic of homosexuality and the Bible. This one examination is not intended to bring its readers to an ultimate understanding of the topic, but only to aid and assist them in their search for truth, identity, and peace. I have compiled this examination utilizing research and lecture notes from the past several years; as such, this should not be mistaken for an exhaustive examination of the topic.

Blessings for the Journey,

Adam L. Wirrig

Things to keep in mind:

Regardless of one's view on its authenticity or its divinity, one must concede that the Bible is an historic document. As such, we must recognize that it was taken down through the hands of humanity and delivered to cultures and times FAR different than our own. Thus without proper understanding of those times, cultures, and the authors, we lose the applicable meaning and relevance of passages and slip into Biblical eisegesis or "reading our own interpretations" into the texts.

Homosexual as a term did not come into being until the mid 19th century. There is no term in ancient Hebrew or Greek –the languages of the original Biblical manuscripts- which are akin to our modern term of homosexual. Thus to say that ancients saw same-sex relations as we see them today is QUITE erroneous.

Well meaning people have, historically, misused the Bible to subdue that which is different or fearful. (IE: African Americans, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, witches, gypsies, communists, etc.....)

1.) Sodom and Gomorrah / Genesis 18:

Traditionalist Interpretation: When the men of the city surround the house of Lot, he offers sexual relations with his two daughters to the men of the city in exchange for their ignoring his two visitors. Tradition has interpreted this passage to say that since Lot offered his two daughters in a sexual connotation, the men of the city must have first been interested in sexual relations with Lot's two male visitors.

The Languages: The original languages are problematic for the traditional interpretation of this passage. Foremost, the men of the city demand that Lot "συγγενωμεθα" his guests.

“Συγγενωμεθα” comes from “γινωμαι” and means: “prove who they are!”¹ This is contra to the words which Lot uses to offer his daughters: “εγνωσαν” which comes from: “γινωσκω” and “χρησασθε” both of which have clear and common sexual overtone in the ancient languages.²

Context: To bear in mind that this is a passage written to an entirely different culture is critical to a proper interpretation of this passage. Many in the traditional camp cite the presence of only men gathered around Lot’s house to show a homosexual intent. This is highly erroneous when one considers the cultural dynamics of the original audience. Ancient Near-Eastern cultures functioned on social systems of honor, shame, and patriarchy. Women would not have been present at Lot’s house as they were second class citizens of their time and had no intrinsic honor of their own. If a woman would have been present at the house of Lot, her spouse/family would have lost a considerable amount of honor in the eyes of the community and, most likely, she would have been stoned to reclaim that honor. (Note: This social dynamic is not too different from some that we see in Islamic cultures today, if that helps putting it into perspective!)³

It is also quite crucial to note later Biblical references to the town and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Per Boswell, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referenced in dozens of places throughout the Old Testament, but never is its damning sin named as homosexuality or same-sex interaction. Instead, in Ezekiel, its sins are listed as: “...pride, fullness of bread, and not strengthening the hand of the poor and the needy.” Jesus, himself, in Matthew 10:14-15 seems to reference this as being the sin Sodom was known for.⁴

Conclusion: Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of its wickedness. However, to cast homosexuality as the sin which damned Sodom and Gomorrah is textually, culturally, and historically inaccurate.

2.) Leviticus: 18:22 and 20:13.....

Traditionalist Interpretation: Traditionalists identify this passage as one which is implicit in its denunciation of homosexuals. By calling sexual interaction with another man “abomination” the writers seem to have provided a clear-cut message that homosexual activities are blatantly wrong.

The Languages: While this passage seems to be quite clear it is, in fact, not at all what many make it out to be. The word for: “Abomination” in the Septuagint - βδελυγμα -connotes

¹ Unless otherwise noted all Old Testament references are taken from Rahlfs-Hanhart’s “Septuaginta” (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006.)

² Danker, Frederick W ed. “A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature.” (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2000.)

³ Malina, Bruce J. “Windows on the World of Jesus” (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.)

⁴ Boswell, John. “Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality” (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980.) 90-118.

something which causes ritual impurity, NOT moral impurity. (This is also true of the word in the original Hebrew writings.)⁵

Context: The book of Leviticus is a book from the “Priestly” source tradition. As such, it seeks to establish rules, regulations, and methods to ensure proper interaction with YHWH. It is not a book intent on establishing intrinsic values of right or wrong, but instead establishes that which makes a person “clean” or “unclean” in the ancient sacrificial system. The book also focuses upon that which a person must do in order to return to ritual cleanliness. In light of this, one must remember that heterosexual intercourse, touching the dead, eating pork or shell-fish, being on a menstrual cycle, or working on a Sabbath would make one ritually impure.

Conclusion: In light of the linguistic and contextual examinations, it IS right to say that homosexual sexual relations would in fact make one ritually impure in the ancient sacrificial system. What is inaccurate is to say that this is grounds to call homosexuality and same-sex relationships wrong. To say that homosexuality is or isn’t permissible based on its ritual standing is misguided, as contact with ANY bodily fluid or any sort of sexual relationship – hetero or homosexual in nature- would make one ritually impure.

3.) 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

Traditional Interpretation: Traditionalists cite and translate these passages as ones which condemn homosexuality. Both passages provide a veritable “laundry list” of sins which will prohibit one from entering or receiving the “Kingdom of God.”

The Languages: In 1 Corinthians 6:9, various traditional translations translate the words- μαλακος and Αρσενοκοιται to mean homosexual, male prostitute, sodomite, or practicing homosexual or to imply those meanings. (IE: “....Nor male prostitutes -μαλακος, nor homosexual offenders- αρσενοκοιται.....⁶”) Unfortunately, these translations are quite erroneous and are ignorant of earlier historic translations. ⁷

Μαλακος, is a highly common word in the Greek New Testament. Per Martin: μαλακος, until the 20th century, was translated as: effeminate, wanton, or licentious (IE: Wycliffe, Tyndale, Cranmer, and the Geneva Bibles). ⁸ Only in the mid 19th century –upon post industrial revolution redefinition of sexual ethics, the beginning of medical qualifications of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and with the rise of homosexual sub-culture- did English translations of the Bible begin to substitute meanings such as: Catamite, or Sodomite. In fact, per Boswell, up through the ancient church, the Reformation, Catholicism, and up until the past century, the term was applied to masturbation, not to homosexuals. It

⁵ Danker, *Ibid.*

⁶ The Bible: *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998.)

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all New Testament Biblical references are from: The Greek New Testament (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1988.)

⁸ Martin, Dale B. “*Sex and the Single Savior*” (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006.) 37-50.

has only been with the de-stigmatization of masturbation that the sanction of this term has been transferred to another stigmatized group.⁹

Αρσενοκοιται, found in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, is a term which is quite rare in the New Testament. Per Martin, the term is so rare that it is HIGHLY difficult to construct a concise and definitive meaning. Until the fourth century, the term was generally accepted to mean: "Male Prostitute." After that time it was equated with disapproved sexual practices and commonly equated to same-sex interactions. However, newer studies have found the word to be linked to lists of economic sin and/or lists of sin which span sex and the economy. Thus a definition of: "Male prostitute or one which uses sexual favor for economic advancement and/or exploitation" would seem to be more fitting to the original languages.¹⁰ Secondly, it should be noted that there is significant evidence from Medieval and Reformation era sources which link this term to pederasty or pedophilia, not necessarily same-sex adult interactions.¹¹

Context: Context would seem to have little to no bearing in these passages as linguistic research reveals both original cultural usage and historic definition of the terms which are, today, applied to homosexuality.

Conclusion: Upon examination of the original and historical usage of the terms found in the selected passages, it is extremely hard to label the condemnations found in these passages as being applicable to homosexuals in modernity.

4.) Romans 1: 26-27.....

Traditionalist Interpretation: Traditionalists cite references to the exchange of natural relations for un-natural relations with the same sex in this passage as one which shows same-sex relationships to be un-natural and debauched.

The Languages: The linguistics of this passage are of critical concern to understanding the text. When the authors speaks of women "exchanging" natural relationships they utilize the term "μετηλλαξαν" which comes from "μεταλλασσω" and implies exchanging, altering, or changing. In the same way, the author uses the term "αφεντες" in verse twenty-seven to describe men exchanging natural for un-natural relationships. "Αφεντες," which comes from "αφιημι" describes an "abandoning, divorce, or letting go." Thus, the linguistics of the passage seem to make clear that those who are participating in the proscribed acts are

⁹ Boswell, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Martin, *Ibid.*

¹¹ For specific examples, one might view Luther's and/or LeFevre's translations of such passages. It should be noted that authors, such as Puff, would attribute such a usage to the authors utilizing circumlocution to describe a sin which was "un-namable" at the time. While this is a definite possibility, it is odd that Luther would utilize terms such as "knave" or "heretic" to discuss the same-sex adult interactions in his sermons, but in this instance would utilize a specific term like "pedophile." Therefore, one cannot assume that Luther did not proscribe same-sex adult interaction, however, in the case of 1 Corinthians 6:9, it would seem he is naming another term entirely.

doing so with as a deliberate departure of that which they might have once known or engaged in.¹²

Context: Context is crucial to this passage. Same-sex relationships are NOT the central theme to this extended passage. The entire focus of the 1st Chapter of the Letter to the Romans is: idolatry; or, leaving what is natural for that which is unnatural. With that in mind, there are several critical things to discuss here.

Primarily, we must ask whether or not the author is setting out to give an over-arching condemnation of monogamous same-sex relations, or is the author citing non-monogamous same-sex “hook-ups” as an example of those who have left what is natural? Another interesting point is that this is the only passage in the Bible to make mention of same-sex relations amongst women. This singular mention thus leaves us with several potential possibilities: 1.) God liked lesbians prior to this, but not after this mention. 2.) Lesbianism didn’t come about until this time. (Mind you this is written at some point in the late first/early second century CE.) 3.) The passage is not addressing lesbians per-se, but to those who are practicing heterosexuals and occasionally “hook-up” with other women. (This holds true for the mention of men exchanging natural relations as well.) Of the three options, I would cite the last as being the most applicable, especially with this passage. The overall literary unit in question is, again, NOT focused upon homosexuality or those who are naturally attracted to the same sex, but upon those who have switched from natural to unnatural. (IE: They EXCHANGED natural relationship or worshiping God for the unnatural relationship of worshiping idols.) Thus, it would seem highly likely that the author’s employment of that which we might call “change-linguistics” seems to imply that those who are receiving sanctions are not those who are definitively oriented towards same-sex interactions, but those who have previously been heterosexual and have tritely committed same-sex interaction.¹³ The ending of the chapter only serves to reinforce that this passage is NOT one which is focused against monogamous same sex relationship. The ending part of the first chapter of Romans provides a laundry list of the sins of the audience that Paul is addressing. Interestingly, same-sex relations –monogamous or not- are not referenced in this list. This GREATLY diminishes the possibility that the author is setting out to give an over-arching condemnation of same-sex relationships.¹⁴

Conclusion: Analysis of the entire book of Romans gives credence that the point of the passage is NOT to provide an over-arching condemnation of homosexuality. The passage in question, Romans 1:26-27, is referencing same-sex acts committed by otherwise heterosexual persons. Lest this be confused with a condemnation of bisexuals, it is crucial to note that those who were receiving this condemnation were functioning on stock sexual desire, NOT monogamous or desires which came naturally to their personal makeup.

¹² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Books, 2000) 83, 260.

¹³ This notion would only seem to be further supported within subsequent French translations, such as LeFevre, which utilize the words “echange” and “abandonnant” to describe the acts of the men and women in question.

¹⁴ Boswell, *Ibid.*

Supplemental Resources:

***Sex and the Single Savior* by Dale Martin** – This is a very good read for anyone who wants to interact with the Biblical texts in an objective and scholarly way. The writing is not too heavy and it doesn't get off track on minute details.

***Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* by John Boswell** – This is the seminal work in the field of Biblical studies and homosexuality. I would not recommend it if you do not have a strong background in history, philosophy, and textual criticism. (This book is SERIOUS dork material.) If you can stomach a heavy read, this work does a nice job of explaining the evolution of same-sex relations and critiques from ancient times up through the medieval era.

***Sex and the Sacred* by Daniel Helminiak** – This is a nice, accessible read that just about anyone can interact with. Helminiak is a former Catholic priest, so, if you come from that background, he can probably speak to you in a way that other authors cannot. I would recommend this as a starting read for anyone who's not in the field of Biblical studies.

***The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* by Mark Jordan** – This book is a difficult read, but is crucial to understanding the concept of "sodomy," how it came to be, and how it came to function in its present context within the Christian community.

***Sodomy in Reformation Germany and Switzerland* by Helmut Puff** – A dry read, this book nonetheless provides critical information concerning the Reformation mind-set and understanding of same-sex interactions.

For a succinct interaction with scriptural passages, I would recommend looking through Victor Paul Furnish's chapter : "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context;" which is found within the book *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*.