

# **Sexuality and the Church: A Conversation about the Bible, Ethics, and Communities of Interpretation**

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One keenly sharp issue across denominations and congregations today is the relation of churches to LGBTQ persons. Both churches and individuals are exploring their own theological self-understanding, as well as their sense of mission and purpose, on matters of membership, blessings of unions, marriage equality, ordination, employment, and more. For most Christians, such exploration includes biblical interpretation, at least as one element in discernment. Indeed, questions regarding the Bible and sexuality provide a particularly sharp angle for asking how we move from scripture to ethical teaching and practice. Not only for same-sex sexuality but for sexuality more broadly, what do some of the biblical authors urge, and where do we stand in relation to that? What do biblical authors condemn, and where do we stand in relation to that? Furthermore, what ethical responsibility do we have now as heirs of religious language and practice that have historically been used to exclude, condemn, and vilify?

Christian believers turn to scripture to explore not merely what to think but how to live. Honest interpreters recognize that there is more than one plausible way to interpret texts. So especially when love, equity, and ethics are at stake, we are challenged to become as clear as we can about the guidelines or principles that shape our interpretations or lead us to choose one interpretation or reading as more compelling than others.

When principles of interpretation go unexamined or unstated, they work more as claims to authority, ways to persuade, or retreats into private conscience than as invitations to dialogue or discovery or evaluation.<sup>1</sup> The present study turns to passages in the Bible that seem to treat same-sex sexuality and explores them for their relevance to contemporary questions about the church and sexuality. Other studies have tackled these texts, of course; this one urges particular reflection and candor about our principles or guidelines or approaches to interpretation. If we can describe *how* we're making our decisions, we open ourselves up to being

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Cosgrove provides a thought-provoking discussion of hermeneutical rules. I am indebted to his analysis, though my conclusions sometimes differ from his. See Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

more accountable to one another—more of a community of readers. We may also find that the biblical passages in question challenge our sexual ethics in unexpected ways.

Consider, then, how the following principles may be helpful to guide interpretation of Biblical passages that may pertain to same-sex sexuality.

- I. **Acknowledge “proportion” in the biblical witness—including frequency, density, and consistency.** According to this guideline, topics or issues that are treated frequently and consistently in scripture (for example, divine mandates to show special regard for the poor and socially vulnerable) should have greater weight than those treated infrequently. At times, one might deviate from this principle and find sporadic insights to be ethically compelling, such as the spare but crucial biblical witnesses to women’s leadership. Nevertheless, the striking infrequency of biblical references to same-sex sexual relations indicates that such matters are simply not a major concern in the Bible.

In the sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible, fewer than ten references *might* have something to do with sexual relations between men and men or women and women. Most people count seven (Gen 18:16-19:29, Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; Romans 1). Jesus says nothing about same-sex sexuality. Because the issues facing LGBTQ persons are pressing, Christians understandably turn to the Bible for guidance. But when we select and focus on these scattered references (even in this present study), we are to some extent distorting the proportion or balance of interest in the biblical books. The infrequency of reference also heightens ambiguity, because we can’t clarify one passage by turning to a sturdy set of others.

- II. **Respect the genre or mode of communication of any part of the Bible.** A key principle of interpretation for many is that the Bible is not simply a rule book. Rather, it is a remarkable anthology of diverse literary forms, including:<sup>2</sup>
  - Stories that inspire the moral imagination
  - Hymns and prayers that infuse the life of faith

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<sup>2</sup> See related discussion by Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 208-9.

- Patterns of instruction, debate, reflection, and worship
- Theological and ethical principles, symbols, and paradigms
- Rules, laws, or guidelines for specific practices

Reducing a narrative or poem to extractable rules may actually diminish its power to inspire or challenge. Not all would agree, however; for some, the “rulish” quality of the Bible seems present in all or most of its parts.<sup>3</sup>

**III. Value clarity and be cautious with ambiguity, whether linguistic or historical or cultural.** Simply put, if you don’t know what it means, don’t turn it into a rule.

**IV. Be attentive to historical and cultural context and difference.** Particular acts and social practices are always embedded in a larger cultural web or network of social practices, from which they derive their meaning. As interpreters, we must be attentive to the broader historical and cultural patterns as we decide whether a particular rule or practice is transferable to our own time and place.

**V. Ask, is the purpose or rationale or symbolic value of a biblical precept of greater weight than the specific requirement?**

**VI. Be willing to say what larger theological commitments guide our choices in interpretation.** From Jesus to Augustine to contemporary ethics, the double love command – love of God and love of neighbor – has often been considered the final test of whether an interpretation is sound. Particular readers or communities may also articulate other theological principles (for example, justice, fidelity, integrity, and more) or scriptural touchstones (perhaps passages such as Micah 6:8; Matt 25:40; Lev 19:2; John 3:16; Gen 1:26; or Gal 3:28) that serve as guides to or tests of interpretation.

*In general, how do you react to these principles or guidelines? Do members of your discussion group have other general principles to propose? (Such discussion will, of course, gain focus and point once you are discussing specific biblical passages).*

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<sup>3</sup> Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate*, 18.

## Two Narratives from the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament

We start with two stories. Biblical stories may inspire profound and challenging moral or ethical insights without being used as a source for rules. We'll treat one of these only in passing (Judges 19) but examine the other closely (Genesis 18:16-19:29). Though neither story may finally prove relevant for contemporary LGBTQ persons and relationships, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah may nevertheless make surprising claims on us.

In Genesis 18:1-19:29, we encounter stories of Abraham, Lot, and the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham has by this time in the narrative entered into covenant with Yahweh and been promised he will be the father of a great nation that will bless all other nations, but he doesn't have a son with his wife Sarah. He has separated from his nephew Lot, has been told his steward can't be his heir, and has been told Ishmael will be blessed but isn't the promised heir. So he has a covenant but no heir to the covenant.

Some visitors show up traveling (strangely for this part of the world) in the middle of the day. The story uses a mysterious, enigmatic shift of reference, saying "the Lord" appears, then "three men," then again "the Lord," then by the next chapter "two angels." Before the purpose of the visit becomes evident, the narrator describes Abraham's actions, with a noteworthy level of detail for Genesis.

- *As you read, note at least one detail in Abraham's actions that particularly strikes you.*
- *How would you sum them all up? What virtue is being exhibited?*

**Genesis 18: 1 – 9 (NRSV)** 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and

took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> 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.

Abraham shows *eager, liberal hospitality* to the three emissaries of Yahweh (18:3-5) -- running, bowing, hastening, running, hastening, then standing while they eat yogurt, milk, cakes, and veal. He offers them "a morsel of bread" but fixes a banquet.

In the next scene (18:9-15), with Sarah listening, the messengers confirm the promise of a son. Sarah laughs, then is afraid at divine knowledge of her skeptical thoughts, but the scene remains one of blessing.

Then, in a remarkable interior monologue, the narrator invites us into the very thoughts of God.

- *As you read, consider why Abraham needs to know what the LORD is about to reveal?*

**Genesis 18: 17-19 (NRSV)** <sup>17</sup> The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup> seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup> 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."

There's something about **righteousness and justice** that Abraham must learn and be able to teach his descendants, something of so great a magnitude that it relates to Abraham's capacity to bless all nations. As the monologue continues, we learn that what Yahweh is about to do pertains to a grievous sin in Sodom and Gomorrah.

- *As you read, do you hear any clues about what the "very grave sin" may be?*

**Genesis 18: 20-21 (NRSV)** <sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! <sup>21</sup> 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.”

The grave sin is not specified, but there may be a clue in the use of the term “outcry” in verses 20 and 21. Elsewhere in the Hebrew scripture, God heeds the **outcry** of the Hebrew people harshly enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 3:7); an **outcry** signals abuse of widows and orphans (Exodus 22:21-23); God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard an **outcry!** (Isaiah 5:7). That is, in other passages, “outcry” suggests some pervasive exploitation and social corruption. Nahum Sarna concludes, “The sin of Sodom, then, is heinous moral and social corruption, an arrogant disregard of basic human rights, a cynical insensitivity to the sufferings of others....”<sup>4</sup>

In Abraham’s previous dialogues with God, he has been concerned with his own promises and fate. Now he intervenes for others.

- *What particularly strikes you in Abraham’s next actions? What virtue does he now exhibit?*

**Genesis 18: 23-25 (NRSV)** Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? <sup>24</sup> 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? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

Abraham provides a remarkable demonstration of how to understand righteousness and justice. He asks, what if there’s a righteous minority? What is the fate of a just minority within a wicked majority? When is judgment just? And his negotiation continues: will Yahweh save the city for 50 righteous persons, for 45, 40, 30, 20, 10...?

The dialogue creates a high narrative tension and points the readers’ interest as the angels arrive in Sodom: what constitutes righteousness in this story, and how many will manifest it?

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<sup>4</sup> Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 132.

- *What detail particularly strikes you in Lot's actions.*
- *How would you sum them all up? What virtue is being exhibited?*

**Genesis 19:1-3 (NRSV)** 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. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> 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.

How do you spot a righteous man? As Abraham did, Lot manifests a strong code of hospitality -- bowing, insisting that they enter his home, preparing a feast. So we have one righteous man; will there be more?

**Genesis 19:4 (NRSV)** <sup>4</sup> 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;

There will be no other righteous men in this story; the men of Sodom make plain their wickedness:

**Genesis 19:5 (NRSV)** 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."

In contrast to Lot's hospitality, the men of Sodom are predatory against strangers. The Hebrew verb "know" is sometimes used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Some have argued that here the verb need not be sexual in meaning: rather, the men of Sodom want to identify the strangers because they are rejecting aliens in their midst. Most interpreters, however, think the men of Sodom seek to rape the strangers. Righteous *versus* wicked here becomes hospitable asylum *versus* mob violence, and that violence is sexualized. Counterparts to this scene in our time are not found in loving desire or relationships between men, but in the shaming, brutal attacks we read about in coverage of wars, genocides, and extreme criminal acts.

Moreover, the reading of "know" as sexual is confirmed by Lot's response, as we witness hospitality that has lost its moral bearings.

**Genesis 19:6-7 (NRSV)** <sup>6</sup> Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup> and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup> 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."

A father offers his virgin daughters to protect the travelers -- an extreme, emergency distortion of hospitality. At this juncture, one must ask soberly, how available is this story for contemporary appropriation, particularly about sexual matters? This is a story in which the *righteous character* -- the one the narrative tension has put in the spotlight -- offers his daughters to be raped. **This is not a stable moral story world for us to enter, look around, and elicit rules about contemporary sexual practices.**

The story continues with the mob's mockery of Lot as an alien and their threat of violence (19:9-11), the escape of Lot's family (19:12-23), and the destruction of the city (19:24-26), with Abraham as witness (19:27-28).

What, then, is the grave sin referred to back in 18:20? Does the scene at the door constitute the grave sin? If so, then the grave sin is predatory, violent forms of sexuality motivated by the desire to dominate, shame, and abuse immigrants or travelers. In the ancient world, rape of men by men was profoundly shaming—a form of emasculation. The sin at the door is not homosexuality in any contemporary or general sense. And even the scene at the door, awful as it is, seems not to be of a scope that would lead Yahweh to say that from it Abraham will learn about justice and righteousness in a way that will benefit all nations. Rather, the scene at the door seems symptomatic of a deep societal breakdown of justice and righteousness.

In Judges 19, in a horrifying story that bears some structural similarities to Genesis 19, a Levite and a concubine are travelling in territory of Benjamin. No one offers hospitality, until a certain old man coming in from the field offers them shelter and food. The men of the city, a perverse lot of gangsters, arrive at the door, demand to "know" the Levite, and are offered women in his place. In this story, however, unlike Genesis, one woman is thrown out the door. The concubine suffers gang rape and death, then dismemberment by the Levite, her dispersed body serving as a tribal rallying cry against the Benjamites. Relying on this story for any connection to contemporary same-sex sexuality requires,

among other things, a callous disregard to its representation of the brutalized woman.<sup>5</sup>

But the Sodom story has a different place in history of interpretation. The association of Sodom's destruction with a condemnation of homosexuality has a cultural history, whether or not a close literary reading of the narrative supports the connection. In part, the long linguistic presence of the word "sodomy" in English makes it difficult for some not to associate the story with condemnation of a particular sex act. Yet biblical Hebrew does not take the name of the city and turn it into a word for a sex act. Neither does biblical Greek. "Sodomy" comes from Latin. The Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century seems to have been the first to use the city name to stipulate same-sex acts. From Latin the term came into other European languages. So since late antiquity or the middle ages in Western culture, "Sodom" has been taken to be emblematic of sex between men and men. We inherit that interpretation, and its devastating link of sexuality, divine rejection, and death. But those are not the oldest or first interpretations.

Sodom captured the imagination of many other Biblical writers, often serving as the paradigm of a city deserving destruction – but the biblical writers don't understand same-sex sexual practice as the paradigmatic sin. For the prophets Sodom variously represented injustice and lack of shame about sin (Isaiah 1:10ff; 3:9); adultery, lying, and evil (Jer 23:14); pride, excess of food, and lack of assistance for the poor and needy (Ezek 16:49). For Jesus, Sodom represented inhospitality and the rejection of God's representatives (Matt 10:12-15; Luke 10:10-12). Only in Jude and 2 Peter—letters which use sexualized accusations to vilify the writers' opponents—do references to Sodom carry some sexualized overtones (Jude 7, which may be translated "went after foreign flesh"; 2 Peter 2:6-10). In other words, the weight of interpretation within the Bible associates Sodom with broad breaches of righteousness and social justice, not with a particular sexual practice.

- *How, then, might the "principles of interpretation" outlined at the beginning of this study affect your reading of Genesis 18-19?*

A fascinating narrative, Genesis 18-19 nevertheless seems ill suited to provide general rules for sexual practices. With its high levels of anthropomorphism and

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<sup>5</sup> See the careful interpretation by Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 65-91.

destruction, the passage also does not seem to offer one of the Bible's more profound glimpses of God. And yet, perhaps the story's image of hospitality makes a strong claim on our moral imaginations and investments. Abraham serves the better meal and is a more righteous figure than Lot, but Lot shows that hospitality includes protection from violence and from sexual forms of predation. Hospitality creates safe spaces. Abraham's bold advocacy for a just but endangered minority might also inspire. Who are the most vulnerable in this story? Travelers, immigrants, and women, even those who should have a father or husband as protector. The story calls readers to recognize that hospitality isn't just about beef and milk, but about creating safe spaces for those who are vulnerable. The contrast is between Lot's persistent, risk-taking hospitality, including shelter from attack, and the city's violence and desire to degrade strangers. Can we, then, be inspired by that contrast and extend it *to all* the characters in the story, or in our story, hearing a call to protect those who are at risk in our society?

For perhaps the most vulnerable in the sex wars are also bringing God to us: "Be not forgetful to entertain [show hospitality to] strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2, KJV)

### **Two legal texts from the holiness code of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament**

Within the legal material of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, two specific verses express a prohibition of a man "lying with a male as with a woman" (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). Some readers hear these verses as relevant to contemporary situations, despite not taking Leviticus more broadly as a guide to Christian practice. Other readers mostly set Leviticus aside, these verses included, as culturally, historically, and theologically too remote to make much claim on Christians today (except for clear high points that Jesus validated, especially "love your neighbor as yourself;" Lev 19:18). Perhaps these particular verses invite us to discuss how we interpret specific details, verses, or practices in relation to broader symbolic and thematic patterns of meaning.

Leviticus falls into two parts, both concerned with purity.<sup>6</sup> Chapters 1-16 offer regulations for sacrifice, ritual purity, and a range of other concerns and duties of priests. Chapters 17-26 (often termed the "Holiness Code") then turn to the

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<sup>6</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics. A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) 175-183. Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford University Press, 2000) 22-31.

theme of holiness. As Leviticus scholar Jacob Milgrom shows, these chapters offer *a remarkable democratization of the concept of holiness*.<sup>7</sup> Not just priests but all the people of Israel are addressed; not just the Temple, but the land itself must be protected; not just ritual purity, but also moral purity is at issue. All of Israel receives a call to holiness: that is, to be like God, and to be involved in elaborate processes of separation. In the theology of the Holiness Code, separation produces order out of chaos (in creation and in the call of Israel), so Israel must separate itself from the contaminating ways of other nations and not resemble the Canaanites or Egyptians.<sup>8</sup> Boundaries and lines are essential, and the code includes many prohibitions of blurring, confusing, or corrupting. The regulation of sexual behaviors is one manifestation of the broader concern to keep apart things which should be separate. This section of Leviticus offers a theological ecology of holiness: if Israel pollutes the land, the land will become infertile and will eject the people. Scholars generally concur that the Holiness Code offers more a radical social ideal than a description of social reality as it was in ancient Israel.

Leviticus 18-20 draws together disparate instructions that range from agricultural practice to the fibers in clothing to ethical treatment of the socially vulnerable to sexual practices. Chapter 19, often considered the heart of the whole book, includes a call to loving action toward all neighbors, injunctions against exploiting the vulnerable, and an insistence that no one be indifferent to injustice. On either side, chapters 18 and 20 largely repeat each other, though organized differently, with chapter 20 specifying violations that deserve capital punishment. Both include detailed prohibitions of incest, specifying forbidden relationships, and making clear that women living under the protection of males in an extended family compound were not to be considered sexually available to those males. In that context come prohibitions of sexual acts between males: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev 18:22, NRSV); “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” (Lev 20:13 NRSV).

Leviticus rarely provides reasons for its requirements.<sup>9</sup> The restriction of a man lying with a male “as with a woman” is given no specific rationale or

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<sup>7</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 175-183.

<sup>8</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 178.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen Davis, drawing on Milgrom and Mary Douglas, remarks, “Unlike the preachers of Deuteronomy, the authorial voice in Leviticus offers little of either explanation or motivation; ‘I am YHWH (your God)’

explanation. Sexual acts between women are not mentioned or prohibited (though women are addressed as sexual actors in other prohibitions in Leviticus). The worry may therefore be that masculinity will be compromised, or that lower status or younger males will be treated as sexual property. Or the prohibition may be part of the general concern that Israel not resemble other nations. Chapter 20's reference to the death penalty implies there is no repentance or remedy for certain sins except death to spare pollution of the land – a theological view that other voices in the Bible emphatically refute. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible offers no further discussion to help clarify these two references—no other legal precepts or case law, no prophetic pronouncements, no narratives (other than the sexualized mob violence of Genesis 19 and Judges 19).

In the end, Leviticus offers a symbolic system where meaning inheres in intimate interconnections. Contemporary Christians rarely if ever validate particular practices or prohibitions by extracting one or two verses from Leviticus, except for these verses about male-male sexual acts. A more responsible approach to interpretation may be to appreciate the broad cultural matrix of this ancient code and its theological investments, rather than to selectively find some prohibitions still relevant and not others. Leviticus as a whole may challenge us with its “theologically profound vision of the complexity and interdependence of the created order.”<sup>10</sup> Or as Mary Douglas observes, “The idea of goodness in Leviticus is encompassed in the idea of right ordering. Being moral would mean being in alignment with the universe, working with the laws of creation, which manifest the mind of God.”<sup>11</sup>

- *How is contemporary rhetoric about same-sex relations still marked by the specific language of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13?*
- *When interpreters set aside these verses as not relevant in current contexts, how often do they then also turn away from other dimensions of the theology or symbolic system of Leviticus?*

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is about the extent of it. The thought pattern is associative, correlative—in Mary Douglas’s term, ‘mytho-poetic’.... Thus by means of ‘strings of concrete examples,’ the text delineates the right ordering of the world, or of the microcosm that is Israel, its people and land.” Ellen F. Davis, “A Wholesome Materiality: Reading Leviticus,” in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 44.

### Three New Testament Passages

Same-sex sexual acts seem to be mentioned in two New Testament vice lists (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) and one narrative of decline that appears as part of a larger argument (Rom 1). Before turning to these passages, it may be helpful to sketch something of the ancient codes and values relating to sexuality in the time and place within which early Christianity grew – the social world we call *Greco-Roman*, meaning it had been shaped by Greek language and culture and was under the domination of the Roman empire.

The ideal human in the ancient world was understood to be an elite male, and sexual norms were constructed from his point of view. For the most part, a free, wealthy, high-status male would face little if any social disapproval if had sex with his wife, or with a prostitute, male or female, or with his slaves, male or female, or with an adolescent boy (as long as that boy wasn't a son of a noble house). Unless his sexual desires seemed out of control, he would be seen to be exercising his sexual privilege. Moral philosophers did argue it should be otherwise: that the key measure of virtue and masculinity should be self-control over the passions, and sometimes, their arguments were heeded. Sexual relationships in antiquity generally were not usually understood as between equals, but as involving an active and a passive role, and an inevitable hierarchy. We find a surprising amount of discussion in ancient Greek literature about the desirability of boy love (versus the love of women), and much discussion of relationships between older men and boys. Greek culture and some parts of Roman culture were tolerant of the sexual use of adolescent boys; Jewish culture generally wasn't, and neither were the early Christians. That difference may be relevant to how we read some early Christian vice lists.

Lists of vices and virtues were a common element in ethical texts in the Greco-Roman world, showing up in philosophic texts, Jewish texts, and Christian texts both inside and outside the canon. Vice lists could be offered as lists of bad people, bad acts, or bad motives or character traits. Looking at how a list is organized and what categories of vices are most represented can provide a window into the writer's concerns.

- *As an example, how would you name categories of vices in Galatians 5:19-21? Which category does Paul seem most worried about as he is writing to this particular cluster of Christians?*

**Galatians 5:19-21 (NRSV)** <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

As he writes to the Galatians, Paul seems most concerned about forms of strife or discord in the community.

- *As you read another of Paul's vice lists, this one from 1 Corinthians, what categories do you see (two key words are deliberately left untranslated, but you might guess their category from adjacent terms)?*

**1 Corinthians 6:9:** "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *malakoi*, *arsenokoitai*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."

Paul's categories in this list may seem more mixed together – sexual sins, idolatry, property violations, and general breaches of boundaries. Indeed, a broader reading of 1 Corinthians shows that Paul fears such vices are mixed together in the community.

Two terms in the list are difficult to translate, though for opposite reasons.<sup>12</sup> *Malakos* (plural, *malakoi*) is a very common term in ancient Greek, used to indicate things that are soft – soft clothes, a soft breeze. Used as a gendered term, it may point to femininity. Used as a term for a sexualized vice, as in this list, it could suggest either effeminacy or promiscuity – an unboundaried sexual availability. Paul is using the term to designate a class of people, but what exact practices he finds them guilty of can't be determined from one word in a list. The uncertainty is reflected in the range of ways the term is translated in English Bibles. The King James Version and New American Standard are perhaps the most literal, preserving the ambiguity (and the gender-bias) of the term as they translate it "effeminate." Other translators try to specify an ancient social role. Perhaps noticing that the list includes both sexual and economic vices, some have decided that it means males who were commercially sexually available: "boy prostitutes" (NAB), "male prostitutes" (NIV, NRSV). Given how often

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<sup>12</sup> See the careful discussion by Dale B. Martin, "*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences," in *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 37-50.

prostitutes in the ancient world were slaves, either Paul or his translators might here be charged with blaming victims.

*Arsenokoitēs* (pl. *arsenokoitai*) is difficult to translate for the opposite reason: because it is an unusual, compound term. In fact, Paul's list in 1 Corinthians is the first written example of its use preserved in ancient Greek texts. The first half of the compound word indicates males; the second has to do with lying down, but what particular social practice is in view is not clear. Again, sampling a range of English Bible translations makes clear the ambiguity. Older translations preserve the vague reference: "liers with men" (Douay-Rheims); "abusers of themselves with mankind" (KJV). Translations made since the modern category of "homosexuality" emerged have inserted that category into the ancient list, somewhat anachronistically: "homosexuals" (NASB), "sodomites" (NRSV). Other interpreters conclude that because *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are paired, the former may be male prostitutes, the latter those patronizing them. Whatever Paul meant, the term he chose is pointed at males, not females.

This rare term appears in a second NT vice list written in Paul's name – a list of the types of people who urgently need the law:

**1 Timothy 1:9-11 (NRSV)** "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 (*androphonoi*), fornicators (*pornoi*), *arsenokoitai*, slave traders (*andrapodistai*), 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."

Here *arsenokoitai* is positioned between a word for sexual immorality and a word for buying and selling human beings – possibly (though not certainly) suggesting that some commercialized sexual transaction is in view. Given the ancient social context of the New Testament, these vice lists may be condemning male prostitution, or they may be protesting the sexual use of boys, or they may be prohibiting sexual practices associated with pagan religious practice, or they may be opposing all sexual acts between men and men -- but one can't decide securely which one is most probable. Perhaps the responsible principle of interpretation in such cases is simple: if you don't know what it means, don't turn it into a rule.

Sampling these vice lists may, however, aid in discussion of Romans 1 and its place in Paul's epistle to the Romans. The church at Rome had both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in it. Paul was not the founder of this church and at the time he wrote, he had not yet visited it. He writes, hoping they will support his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles and wanting to say something about Jews and Gentiles in the plan of God. Romans 1 is therefore not a freestanding element within Paul's argument. Many readers see this section beginning at 1:16,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (NRSV)

and culminating at 3:22b-24:

“For there is no distinction, <sup>23</sup> since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup> they are now justified by his grace as a gift” (NRSV).

To make this argument, Paul devotes the remainder of chapter 1 to how the pagans or polytheists fell short of God's glory and chapters 2-3 to how the Jews fell short of God's glory, even though they had the Law to help them.

- **Imagine yourself as a mixed audience listening to Paul's letter in the church in Rome. Some of you are Gentile Christians and some are Jewish Christians. How might the two groups hear Paul's characterization differently?**

**Pagans can know from creation that there is one God:**

**Romans 1:19-23 (NRSV)** <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honor God as God or give thanks to God, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Verse 23 presents the first of several key uses of the word “exchange”

- They exchanged the glory of God for images or idols (v. 23)
- They exchanged the truth about God for a lie (25)
- They exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural (26)

Another key pattern marks Paul's argument – the language of God giving people up:

- Once humans became polytheists, *God gave them up* to impurity(24)
- *God gave them up* to degrading passions (26)
- *God gave them up* to ... things that should not be done. (28)
- *As you continue reading, imagine how the Gentile Christians are reacting to the emphasis on "God gave you up?"*

**Romans 1:24-28 (NRSV)** <sup>24</sup> Therefore *God gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. <sup>26</sup> For this reason *God gave them up* to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, *God gave them up* to a debased mind and *to things that should not be done*.

Other ancient Jewish texts paint exactly this picture and progression. Polytheism seemed to Paul and to many Jews to be marked by greater promiscuity, by a kind of "boundless" or flagrant sexuality. Verse 26 may be the one note in the Bible that addresses sexual acts between women and women (although early church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria thought Paul meant women were having sex with men but with other parts of the body – "unnatural" referring to orifices, not partners). What is clear is that Paul uses sex between men and men to illustrate the unbounded passions and the sinfulness that follow from pagan idolatry. So how do we respond?

Contemporary readers have drawn the following kinds of conclusions from Romans 1 (other conclusions are also possible, of course).

1. In light of Romans 1, Christians today should see same-sex acts as sinful.

2. Or Paul says the *link* between idolatry and out-of-control sexuality is sinful. He may have been reminding readers of festival or temple practices of flamboyant sexual transgression. Or he may have condemned the sexual acts that some pagans tolerated between men and young boys. But when in our contemporary context, same-gender relationships are not linked to idolatry, are not reckless and promiscuous, and do not prey upon children, then Paul's condemnation does not pertain.
3. Or what has changed is our understanding of *nature*. Given growing testimony from the medical establishment and others that identities and orientations other than heterosexual can be natural, then Paul's views of natural and unnatural do not pertain.

*How do you evaluate these options? What principles of interpretation do you rely on in drawing your own conclusions or formulating further questions?*

Our reading of Romans 1 may also shift when we see where Paul is taking us in his argument... into the longest vice list of the NT – and the most chaotic -- naming people, acts, and attitudes, and not in any recognizable order. One may wonder, in such a sweeping catalogue, is anyone left out?

**Romans 1: 29-32 (NRSV)** <sup>29</sup> They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> They know God's decree, that those who practice *such things* deserve to die-- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Imagine yourselves as a Gentile in the Roman church – you used to be a polytheist; you used to worship idols; you've been hearing – “God gave me up, God gave me up, God gave me up.” Don't some of you want to object, to say, “I didn't do all those things! That's stereotyping! That's racial profiling!”? And then as you hear this vice list – maybe you start saying, “Wait a minute, that sounds like all of humanity.”

Imagine yourselves as Jews in the Roman church – perhaps you start out saying, “Amen, brother – that's right – those pagans should have known God – there is flagrant, appalling sexual stuff going on among them.” Then what happens to

you at the vice list? Aren't you guilty of boasting? Haughtiness? Foolishness? Heartlessness as you're condemning others?

Perhaps Paul catches us all in the vice list. In Paul's theological perspective, we're *all* deserving of death. The longer we slow down to debate the category of "special sinners," the longer we miss Paul's point. Consider how Chapter 2 begins.

Romans 2:1, 4 (NRSV) Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.... 4 Or do you despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

One of the sad ironies of the use of the Bible in debates about homosexuality is that interpreters linger on Romans 1 and don't keep reading to Romans 2 on God's rich kindness and forbearance and patience, and Romans 3 on God's impartiality, justice and grace.

### **Where we land and where we go**

Discussing these select biblical passages on sexuality may leave us with concerns and questions other than those often raised regarding LGBTQ persons and relationships. As welcoming and affirming congregations have concluded, the Bible seems not to offer enough that is clear enough and culturally relevant enough to condemn same-sex relations in our time. The biblical authors simply do not weigh in on committed same-gender partnerships marked by an ethic of mutuality and fidelity that we expect of all faithful relationships.

But perhaps that leaves not merely a negative outcome from this survey. First, the discussion may lead to greater clarity about what guidelines and principles shape our interpretation of scripture. Moreover, from these very passages we hear principles of hospitality, defense against violence and exploitation, advocacy, love of God and neighbor, an ethic of self-control, and a commitment to social protections. We work our way to an image of God who gives no-one up, but who in grace, kindness, forbearance and patience calls all to justice and right relationship.

The category of sexual sin remains pressing—marked not by the gender of the participants, but by matters of exploitation, predation, recklessness, and promiscuity, and the particular vulnerability of girls and boys. Sexualized violence demands our ethical response. Failures of fidelity, attacks on life, and forms of enslavement demand our committed response. Self-control and social protections are deeply scriptural values, yet may be understood as the conditions for desire and intimacy, not the antidote to them. Such issues *do* have striking cultural relevance. At the level of principles, these are passages to think with.

- *Do these texts make a space for ministry and clarity that we are not heeding?*
- *How might passages such as Galatians 3:4, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, or Leviticus 19:18, 34 contribute to this conversation?*
- *What further or different conclusions might you draw, and what principles or guidelines do you rely on in your biblical interpretation?*