



Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality

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Abstract

There are seven texts often cited by Christians to condemn homosexuality: Noah and Ham (Genesis 9:20-27), Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-11), Levitical laws condemning same-sex relationships (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13), two words in two Second Testament vice lists (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:10), and Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 1:26-27). The author believes that these do not refer to homosexual relationships between two free, adult, and loving individuals. They describe rape or attempted rape (Genesis 9:20-27, 19:1-11), cultic prostitution (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13), male prostitution and pederasty (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:10), and the Isis cult in Rome (Romans 1:26-27). If the biblical authors did assume homosexuality was evil, we do not theologize off of their cultural assumptions, we theologize off of the texts we have in the canon. The author attempts to introduce some new arguments into this long-standing and passionate debate.

Key words: homosexuality, cultic prostitution, pederasty, Isis Cult in Rome, Sodom, Noah, Ham, Lot, Levitical Laws, Vice Lists, Paul, letter to Romans

Within recent years passionate debates have been carried on within American Christian denominations over the issue of accepting homosexuals as members in good standing within congregations and accepting actively practicing gay men and women as clergy. A number of years ago I offered to address the regional convention of voting lay and clergy delegates in the denomination to which I belong as a clergyperson (Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) on the topic of what the Bible says about homosexuality. I was told that it would be wise for me not to do so, for although the clergy would understand my presentation, it would cause distress for the laity, especially since I would advocate that individual biblical passages do not directly condemn homosexuality between two loving, free adults. In the years that followed several congregations in that synod left

the ELCA because of their perception that the ELCA was too tolerant of homosexuals. With my presentation, I probably would have caused those churches to leave even sooner than they did. It is a passionate issue for many.

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What the following article contains is a discussion of those passages used by Christians to condemn homosexual behavior. I am not addressing how the later Christian tradition interpreted those passages, nor am I discussing significant church pronouncements on the topic, such as Roman Catholic Canon Law. Nor can I discuss the diverse range of opinions of the many scholars who have commented upon these passages. Either quest would turn this essay into a large book. What I am presenting here are my observations and some of my own particular theories about these biblical texts. Whether my ideas are compelling is for the reader to decide.

There are seven biblical texts oft quoted by those theologians and laity on the theological and the popular levels of discussion to condemn homoerotic behavior of both men and women. These seven texts include the story of drunken Noah and his sons, the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah (which everyone alludes to with absolute certainty that the men of Sodom are homosexuals), two sentence-long prohibitions in the book of Leviticus that condemn men having sex with each other, two words that describe some form of homoerotic behavior used in two lists of vices in the Second Testament, and the condemnation of idolatry and homosexuality by Paul in his letter to the Romans, the only text that perhaps mentions same sex activity by both men and women. What we need to do is look at these passages to observe whether they really condemn homosexual behavior between two consenting, free adults, or whether some other form of activity is being described.

Noah and Ham

Some people believe that the sin of Ham in Genesis 9 was a homosexual act perpetrated against Noah, and they refer to the curse on Canaan as being so drastic because the sin was a homosexual act. The text reads as follows in Genesis 9:20–27:

²⁰Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard.

²¹He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. ²²And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.

²³Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. ²⁴When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵he said, "Cursed

be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers." ²⁶He also said, "Blessed be the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. ²⁷May God make space for Japheth, And let him live in the tents of Shem."

A common interpretation of this passage is that Noah became drunk and undressed himself, or perhaps Ham undressed him, then Ham had anal sex with his father to humiliate him and make himself the master in the relationship, and then Ham either called to his brothers outside the tent or went outside the tent to tell them what he had done to Noah in order to establish his supremacy in the family. When the text says that Noah realized what Ham had done to him, it must imply a physical action, such as rape. The reference to "see the nakedness" of someone can mean to have sex with that person. To "uncover the nakedness of someone" also means to have sex, and our passage may imply that Ham uncovered Noah and then raped him. Hence, the Jewish and Christian traditions have often assumed that actual sexual intercourse occurred. People then conclude that we have a homosexual act that leads to the curse on Canaan, the son of Ham.

If Ham actually had sex with Noah, we are talking about rape, an act designed to humiliate and subordinate someone. The same humiliation and subordination occurs in heterosexual rape, but we do not thereby condemn heterosexuality, a point that is overlooked by critics of homoeroticism (Pizzuto: 165–66). Nor does Ham's action tell us if he is by our modern definition a heterosexual or a homosexual; it tells us that he used sex as an act of power to humiliate his father. Sometimes heterosexuals rape someone of the same sex for the sake of domination, as in prisons, and it does not mean they are homosexuals. In the ancient world those men who are penetrated would be equivalent to what we might call "gay," but those who penetrate might be seen as equivalent to what we might call heterosexuals (Carden: 83–96). The latter would have sex with men, women, or animals because they were manly "men."

Ham also committed an act of incest. Dominating rape and incest are sufficient to warrant the curse that comes upon Canaan; we do not have to conclude that it is homosexuality. Thus, this passage does not address the issue of homosexual love between two free adults, even if it does describe homosexual activity. But it may not actually do even that.

Critical scholars often maintain that Ham did not actually rape his father. When Shem and Japheth came in backwards to avoid looking at Noah, we suspect that inappropriate look-

ing was the actual action of Ham. If simply covering Noah was the solution to the problem, then the offensive action must have been viewing Noah's nakedness. The use of the verb "to see" in this passage is not the usual way of speaking about sex. More likely we would read, "uncover the nakedness" (Lev 18:6; 20:18) or "lie with" (Lev 20:11–12). So sexual activity may not be the sin. The sin may be twofold: viewing a close relative naked, which is a purity violation, and failing to help a parent in distress, a social violation, which for a kinship society was an extremely egregious sin (Westermann: 484, 488–89; Wenham 1987: 198–200; Vervenne: 49–50; Embry: 417–33). The second millennium BCE Aqhat Epic states that it is the responsibility of the son to tend to his father when the old man is drunk: "Who takes him by the hand when he's drunk, Carries him when he's sated with wine" (Pritchard: ANET, 150). This is what Ham failed to do, and perhaps he even made fun of his father's condition. If this is the case, this passage should not be discussed at all in regard to homosexuality.

I cannot prove this, but I believe that the passage is a double-entendre. On the narrative level, Ham simply views his father and fails to help him, but the hint of sexual language with the reference to "lay uncovered" and "saw the nakedness" hints at unbridled sexuality (von Rad: 137). If that is the case, then the curse on Canaan implies that such unbridled sexuality is typical of Canaanite culture because it goes back to their symbolic ancestors (Vervenne: 52–55). Such an allusion is sarcastic theological humor by the biblical author, further indicating that we should not use this passage in our debates.

Sodom

To understand the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 we need to read a parallel narrative: Judges 19, an account that too often is overlooked. In Judges 19:15–28 we read about the experience of a Levite, his concubine, and his servant in the Israelite city of Gibeah,

¹⁵They turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night. ¹⁶Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. (The people of the place were Benjaminites.) ¹⁷When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, "Where are you going and where do you come

from?" ¹⁸He answered him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home. Nobody has offered to take me in. ¹⁹We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more." ²⁰The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square." ²¹So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkey; they washed their feet, and ate and drank. ²²While they were enjoying themselves, 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." ²³And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing." ²⁵But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. ²⁶As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

After reading this text, which is part of a much longer and very complicated narrative, we turn our attention to Genesis 19:1–11,

¹The 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. ²He 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." ³But 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. ⁴But 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; ⁵and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." ⁶Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him ⁷and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. ⁸Look, I have two daugh-

ters 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.”⁹ But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down.¹⁰ But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.¹¹ And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

These two narratives are essentially the same story told in two different versions. The similarities between the two accounts are significant, and they are worthy of detailed listing to demonstrate how truly similar the accounts really are:

- Before even arriving at the city the travelers receive very hospitable treatment. The Levite is entertained by his father-in-law (Judg 19:3–9); the angels are received graciously by Abraham (Gen 18:1–8).
- The visitors enter into the city (Judg 19:15; Gen 19:1).
- They go to either the open square or the city gate, both of which are meeting places for small and large towns respectively (Judg 19:15; Gen 19:1).
- They are met by the host in the meeting place (Judg 19:16–19; Gen 19:1).
- The host does not live in that city. In Judges 19 he is an old man from Ephraim (Judg 19:16); in Genesis 19 he is Lot, a pastoralist living among sedentary folk.
- The host invites them to spend the night in his home (Judg 19:20; Gen 19:2). But both Lot and the old man from Ephraim inappropriately make this offer because they are not full members of the village community (Matthews: 3–11).
- There is a reference to “spending the night in the square,” something that ought not be done (Judg 19:20; Gen 19:2–3).
- The host takes them into his house (Judg 19:21; Gen 19:3).
- The host feeds the guests (Judg 19:21; Gen 19:3).
- They intend to spend the night there (Judg 19:21; Gen 19:4).
- Local men of the city approach the house (Judg 19:22; Gen 19:4).

- These men are said to “surround the house” (Judg 19:22; Gen 19:4).
- They seek the attention of those inside. The men of Gibeah pound on the door (Judg 19:22); the men of Sodom call out for Lot (Gen 19:5).
- They say, “Bring out the man/men” (Judg 19:22; Gen 19:5)
- They clearly indicate that they wish to rape the visitors (Judg 19:22; Gen 19:5). They wish to “know” the men. The same verb, *yadaʿ*, is also used in Genesis 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; 38:26; Judges 11:39; 19:22, 25; 1 Samuel 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4 with the meaning of direct sexual activity. Though few examples out of the 943 usages of the verb refer to sexual activity, the contexts clearly indicate that this is the meaning in those instances where we translate it as such (contra several commentators who believe the Sodom crowd simply wished to talk with the angels).
- The host goes out to speak to them (Judg 19:23; Gen 19:6).
- The host refers to the people in the crowd as “my brothers” (Judg 19:23; Gen 19:7).
- The host says to the crowd, “Do not act so wickedly” (Judg 19:23; Gen 19:7).
- The host declares the men inside are his guests (Judg 19:23–24; Gen 19:8).
- The host offers two women to the crowd for sex. The man of Ephraim offers his daughter and the Levite’s concubine (Judg 19:24); Lot offers his two daughters (Gen 19:8). (It is apparently a bluff with Lot’s offer, because the crowd wants the men. Since they become angry and claim that he plays the role of “judge” over them, this may imply that they are insulted by his implication that they seek only sex, when he offers his daughters, when they really seek to establish their authority over the strangers.)
- The host says, “Let me bring them out” (Judg 19:24; Gen 19:8).
- The host says or implies to the crowd that they may do with the women whatever they please (Judg 19:24; Gen 19:8).
- The crowd rejects his offer (Judg 19:25; Gen 19:9), probably because they want to rape the strangers, and they are being offered women who are local inhabitants. The daughter of the man of Ephraim and both of Lot’s

daughters are locals, and the crowd wants to rape the strangers to demonstrate their power in the town.

- The guests move people through the door. The Levite pushes his concubine out to the crowd (Judg 19:25); the two angels pull Lot back into the house (Gen 19:10).
- Violence occurs outside the house. The concubine of the Levite is raped (Judg 19:25); the men of Sodom are struck blind (Gen 19:11).

Claus Westermann continues the comparison of these two narratives into the sections concerning the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19 and the civil war with Benjamin in Judges 19–21 (297–98).

I have broken the details down in such extreme fashion, more than any other commentator ever has done, in order to demonstrate clearly that these are the same two accounts in slightly different guise. Older commentators assumed that Judges 19 imitated the older story in Genesis 19 because they often assumed the Pentateuchal narratives were older than accounts in the Deuteronomistic History (Wellhausen: 235–37; Moore: 417–18; Soggin: 282, 288). Others more recently have come to the same conclusion by seeing Judges 19 as a “rougher” version of Genesis 19 to demonstrate the extent of sin in that age of the judges (Lasine: 38–41; Brettler: 411–12; Matthews: 3–11).

It would appear to me, however, that the account in Judges 19 is older because it is “rougher” as a narrative and has far greater violence. The Genesis 19 version as a narrative is smoother and far more economical in narrative detail, a sign of later development of a literary form. Instead of two women, one of whom is foreign and the other is local, in Judges 19, Genesis 19 has both women paired as the two daughters of Lot. The old man in Judges 19 offers his guest’s concubine and that is quite inhospitable, but Lot offers only his kin, and thus Genesis 19 has “cleaned up” Lot’s actions compared to the old man of Ephraim (contra Stuart Lasine who believes that Judges 19 “inverts the world” of Genesis 19 by being more violent). In Judges 19:24 the old man invites the crowd to “rape” the women, but Lot simply offers the women, again showing revision in the Genesis 19 version (contra Lasine again). Lot says that the men are his guests once (Gen 19:8), but the man of Ephraim repeats the statement twice (Judg 19:23–24), so that the Genesis narrative appears to be tighter. In Judges 19:22 the text calls the men outside the house “a perverse lot,” a select group, but in Gen 19:4 it generalizes by saying “all the people to the last man,” which will ultimately justify the de-

struction of the entire city by God. In Genesis 19 justice is done when the violent men are struck blind, but in Judges 19 the ending is horrible, and in the ensuing narrative of several chapters the violence is greater and even more revolting. The narrative in Judges 19 is tightly interwoven into the narrative of the Benjaminite civil war of Judges 19–21, whereas the Genesis 19 story is an independent story, somewhat separable from the surrounding narratives in the Abraham cycle (Westermann: 300; Niditch: 365–78). Genesis 19 appears to me to be inspired by Judges 19, and since we now view the Pentateuchal narratives (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers) as later than the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings), this makes good sense.

If we use the principles of “intertextuality,” that is, if one text has influenced the formation of a second biblical text, we can interpret that second biblical text by reference to the first one. We assume that biblical authors expected their listening audience to do the same thing when they sensed a strong similarity of language between two narratives. If you read Judges 19 after Genesis 19 you could theoretically argue, as some do, that the issue is about homosexuality because the threat of homosexual rape to the two angels in the first story carries over into the second story wherein the rape of a woman then is considered to be less offensive than the potential homosexual rape of a man. I personally find this argument horrible. If, however, you read Genesis 19 after Judges 19, I believe that it becomes more evident that the issue of rape is the focus of both accounts. In Judges 19 the threatened rape of a man and the actual rape of a woman then leads you to read Genesis 19 as a story of attempted rape of the two angels.

Popular piety has maintained for years that the Sodom narrative is about homosexuality and that the narrative condemns it. But Genesis 19 is the same account that we read in Judges 19. In Genesis 19 the townsmen try to rape two angels, who are presumably male, but in Judges 19 it is a woman who actually gets raped. If Genesis 19 condemns homosexuality, then clearly Judges 19 condemns heterosexuality. People who love to use Genesis 19 to condemn homosexuals have to avoid Judges 19 because it destroys their argument. Sometimes, it is said by sophisticated critics of homosexuality that both passages condemn homosexuality because the men of Gibeah initially sought to rape a man, then settled for a woman. That is illogical. Using their logic of homosexual identity, that would assume that homosexuals suddenly became heterosexuals. No one seems to make that observation when they

declare homosexual activity to be the common denominator. That the men of Gibeah ask for a man, then rape a woman, both of whom are strangers to the city, obviously points to the common denominator: they are strangers and targets for rape of subordination. That the men of Sodom disdain Lot's offer of women might imply that they want the strangers and not the local girls, or it might imply that they are homosexual. But when they take offense at his offer and claim that he is playing the "judge," it seems to me that they are angry at Lot for assuming their desire is simply for sex when they really wish to demonstrate their power over the strangers.

In both narratives the sin is rape or attempted rape. In particular, it is power rape, that is, sexual violence for the purpose of degrading someone, and the sexual identity of that person is totally irrelevant (Wenham 1994: 55; Stone: 87–107; Nissinen: 47–49; Via and Gagnon: 5; Siker: 2:882–83; Michaelson: 67–72). A variation on this is provided by some scholars who suggest the crowd wants to rape the visitors and extort information from them because they are perceived to be spies who have come late at night to search out the city (McDonald: 179–90). Genesis 14 tells the story of an attack upon Sodom in which citizens were taken as prisoners and later liberated by Abraham, so that one should expect the citizens to be edgy about strangers. An obvious point to make is that the entire crowd of people around Lot's house cannot all be homosexuals, since the text declares that it is all the men in the city who are present. The entire city cannot be homosexual, or else there would be no population (White: 14–23). Homosexual violation, usually by folk we would call heterosexual, in many societies is used to teach subordination to slaves, trespassers, strangers, and newcomers to a community (Carden: 83–96; Gagnon: 77). These stories do not speak of sexual inclination; they are about sexual violence to obtain power over strangers. Conservative commentators who acknowledge that homosexual rape is involved in the story still maintain that thereby all homosexual activity is condemned, but then all heterosexual rape in other biblical narratives would require that we condemn all heterosexuality also.

The sin of the men in both cities is compounded by their violation of the customs of hospitality (Fields: 54–67; Conon: 17–40). Strangers who visit a city are to be taken in and given shelter and food, as was done by both the man of Ephraim and Lot. In fact, by the code of honor in that era, both hosts are duty bound to protect their guests with their lives. Conservative commentators who disdain the argument of hospitality

by saying it is too mild a sin to merit the condemnation that Sodom receives, fail to appreciate the magnitude of this moral requirement of hospitality in ancient Israel. This obligation to the principles of hospitality means being ready to die to protect your guests, and that is why they make the drastic offer of the women to the raging crowd. I believe that there is an element of bluff here, however. The crowd does not want locals, nor do they particularly want the women. Rather, they want to humiliate the men to make the point that this is their town, they run it, and strangers must recognize their power. Sexual preference is irrelevant. It is all about power rape and the humiliation of strangers. Added to that would be the Middle Eastern concept that the highest values of hospitality to strangers has also been violated. It further deserves to be mentioned that the literary context of Genesis 19 points to this issue of hospitality, for the graciousness of Abraham in providing hospitality for the angelic messengers in Genesis 18:1–5 stands in stark contrast to the actions of the citizens of Sodom. Likewise, the literary context of Judges 19 contrasts the hospitality of the Levite's father-in-law with the folk of Gibeah. The citizens of Sodom might also be angry with Lot for offering hospitality to these strangers when he is not really a citizen of the city himself. The account of Sodom has nothing to do with homosexuality between free consenting adults in a loving relationship.

Sodom Imagery Throughout the Bible

Further collaboration for this conclusion may be found by consulting other passages in the First Testament that refer to Sodom. Consider, for example, Isaiah 1:9–10, 16–17, which reads as follows:

⁹If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah. ¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! . . . ¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

In this text the prophet Isaiah compares the nation of Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah, declaring that they almost became like those two destroyed cities because of their sins. When Isaiah tells the folk of Judah what they should be doing, the

categories are justice for the oppressed, the orphans, and the widows. By implication the sins of social injustice in Judah are being attacked by the prophet, and the further implication of the comparison indicates that these were the sins of Sodom.

The prophet Jeremiah likewise implies that the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah may be compared to the sins of Judah, which are described in more general fashion. Jeremiah 23:14 reads as follows:

But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a more shocking thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.

Like the passage in Isaiah, this reference is somewhat vague, but as in the passage in Isaiah, no reference is made to sexual activity. Jeremiah 49:18 and 50:40 simply refer to God overthrowing Sodom and Gomorrah.

The prophet Ezekiel provides the clearest description of how the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were perceived by a later generation. In Ezekiel 16:48–50 we read,

⁴⁸As I live, says the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done.

⁴⁹This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. ⁵⁰They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.

This passage clearly identifies the sin of Sodom as failure to help the poor and needy. What the passage in Isaiah seems to imply, this passage in Ezekiel clearly states. In all of these passages there is no allusion to sexual sins or sexual inclination. Ezekiel 16:53–56 generically pairs Sodom with Samaria as deserving future disgrace.

The destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim are variously mentioned in brief references elsewhere (Deut 29:22–23; 32:32; Lam 4:6; Isa 3:9; 13:19; Hos 11:8; Amos 4:11; Zeph 2:9). Their destruction is meant as a warning that comparable punishment could come upon Israel and Judah, but there is no mention of particular sins.

The prophets sense that the barbaric behavior of the Sodomites toward strangers indicated the lack of social justice in the rest of their activities. Perhaps, the prophets were aware

of other traditions about Sodom, which we do not have (von Rad: 218). At any rate, this further reinforces our opinion that the Sodom story is not about homosexuality, at least not in the First Testament.

In brief allusions in later biblical literature, we read that the sin of Sodom was arrogance. In Sirach 16:8 the wisdom teacher says, "He did not spare the neighbors of Lot, whom he loathed on account of their arrogance."

Though it does not mention Sodom by name, passages in Wisdom of Solomon 19, which speak of the ungodly, make clear allusions to the account in Genesis 19. We read selected verses of Wisdom 19:14, 17:

¹⁴Others had refused to receive strangers when they came to them, . . . ¹⁷They were stricken also with loss of sight—just as were those at the door of the righteous man, when, surrounded by yawning darkness, all of them tried to find the way through their own doors.

This text clearly attributes the sin of inhospitality to strangers as the sin of the citizens of Sodom. A loose allusion is found in Wisdom 10:6–8, which speaks of a "righteous man" escaping "fire that descended on the Five Cities," which were destroyed because "they passed wisdom by" and thus "left for humankind a reminder of their folly." Arrogance, inhospitality, and folly are mentioned in these texts, but no reference to homoerotic behavior appears.

In the Second Testament a number of allusions occur in reference to Sodom. Jesus tells his disciples that those who reject their message will suffer more than the people of Sodom (Matt 10:15 and Luke 10:12) and Gomorrah (Matt 10:15). This, again, is the sin of inhospitality, for Jesus is speaking of how some communities will refuse his disciples; he is not speaking of sexual activity. In Matthew 11:23–24 Jesus says that had his deeds, which he performed in Capernaum, been seen in Sodom, the Sodomites would have responded better. In Luke 17:29 Jesus says that the coming judgment will come as quickly as the fire and sulfur came upon Sodom.

Paul refers to Sodom in Romans 9:29 when he is quoting a passage from Isaiah 1:9. He says nothing, however, about the sin of Sodom, which we should expect, I suppose, if the passage in Roman 1 were really about some form of homosexual behavior.

In 2 Peter 2:4–18 we read that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed due to "the licentiousness of the lawless" (v 7) and "lawless deeds" (v 8). The reference in verse 10, "those

who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority,” may describe the people of Sodom or sinful people in general, for the verses that follow certainly describe sinful human behavior everywhere, not just in Sodom. Thus, one cannot definitely say that the sin of Sodom is portrayed as sexual on the basis of this passage.

In Revelation 11:8 Sodom is a symbolic name for the great city in which the two witnesses were killed (Peter and Paul perhaps), which is most likely Rome.

Only one passage, Jude 7, in the First Testament, refers to the “sexual immorality” and “unnatural lust” of the people in Sodom and Gomorrah, but the text does not specifically identify the sexual depravity as same sex relationships (though that might be a logical conclusion). The text says,

⁶And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day.⁷ Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

The important phrase is in verse 7, “in the same manner as they,” which indicates that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is the same sin as the angels’, whatever that may have been. One would suspect that the sin of the angels was that they came down and had sex with women, as Genesis 6:1–4 seems to indicate. If so, the sin that Jude 7 refers to is sex between angels and people in both narratives. Often for Jews and Christians in that era “unnatural lust” referred to sex that did not explicitly seek procreation, which could be homosexuality, but it could refer to something else. Perhaps, these two passages actually refer to a “transgression of orders” in that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah were seeking sex with angels, which was true, even though the men of Sodom might not have known it. This is the reverse of what the angels had done by coming to earth to obtain human women in Genesis 6:1–4 (Nissinen: 92–93). Another author believes that maybe Jude suspected that the women of Sodom desired sex with the angels (Boswell: 97). Also, the possibility exists that the later biblical authors believed that Sodomites had fertility cult sexual prostitutes (as still existed in their age), and this was the sin of the city according to the passage in Jude (McNeill: 46–49, 70–71).

When we consider the passages in the Bible, none of them can conclusively be said to declare that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality (So also Boswell: 93–96). In other literature of that age, one Jewish Pseudepigraphal work refers to anal intercourse (2 Enoch 10:4–5; 34:2) and other Pseudepigraphical texts refer to sexual vices in general at Sodom, which might be construed as homosexual references (Jubilees 16:5–9; Testament of Naphtali 3:4–5; 4:1; Testament of Ashur 7:1; Testament of Benjamin 9:1; Testament of Levi 14:6) (De Young: 85–109; Esler: 8–9). The equation with homosexuality was made by the Jewish philosopher Philo and the Jewish historian Josephus, and probably they equated pederasty with homosexuality. On the other hand, in later years some church fathers, such as Origen, St. Ambrose, and John Cassian, commented upon the sin of Sodom as crass inhospitality to strangers (Boswell: 98, 346). Not until the 4th century CE do church fathers consistently begin to clearly make the equation with homosexuality (Michaelson: 67). A more extensive consideration of the testimony of the church fathers takes us beyond the limits of this essay, however.

Leviticus 18 and 20

There are two passages in the book of Leviticus that appear to condemn homosexual behavior. Both of these laws appear in what Christians would call the cultic laws of ancient Israel. It is often said that these cultic laws are no longer binding on Christians, so in actuality they are irrelevant for any discussion of homosexuality as a sin. Critical scholars observe that Levitical laws in general condemned activities that the Gentiles did, and these guidelines provided an exclusive identity for Israelites and Jews. So it is assumed the laws are not binding on Christians, who are those Gentiles that are now in the faith community (White: 14–23). But we must admit that numerous laws in Leviticus address criminal activity, so it would be wrong for us to casually dismiss the entire book from the Christian perspective.

People quote Levitical passages on homosexual activity to advance the argument that all homosexuality is a sin, and they observe that some of the laws in Leviticus describe activities that we today would regard as criminal and sinful, and homosexuality is one of these universally evil acts.

In Leviticus 18 we read a long list of prohibitions against having sex with close relatives, and such lists are found elsewhere in the biblical text. The homosexual prohibition is

found among the last three imperatives and reads (in Leviticus 18:21–24) as follows:

²¹You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.
²²You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.
²³You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.
²⁴Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves.

What is unusual about this placement of the homosexual prohibition is that it is found between two passages that describe behavior attributed to the Canaanites by the Israelites. Sacrificing a child to Molech refers to infant sacrifice, a custom practiced in Phoenicia, later Carthage in North Africa, and perhaps among the Canaanites. The first-born son of a family was to be offered up as a sacrifice on the eighth day after birth to insure the continued fertility of the mother. The same was done with the offspring of livestock, and the Israelites performed that ritual. But the theologians of Israel struggled for years to get the Israelites to stop engaging in the human sacrifice of babies. The prohibition that follows the homosexual command forbids both men and women from having sex with animals. This, too, was a reputed custom that supposedly happened in the cultic shrines of other peoples according to Israelite belief. A devotee might have sex with an animal that particularly represented a specific deity in order to have communion with that deity. The fact that women are mentioned in particular makes it appear that this is cultic activity supposedly done by priestesses. Men working on the farm might have sex with animals to satisfy the male sex drive; the cultural assumptions of that age would not attribute such behavior to women as potentially routine activity. The fact that the prohibition is specifically mentioned in regard to women leads me to suspect that we are describing cultic behavior. Commentators fail to observe this detail! Whether sex with animals in the Canaanite cult truly occurred is a matter of debate among scholars, but Israelite rhetoric attributed it to them. The point to be made is that the homosexual prohibition occurs between two laws describing cultic rituals. Verse 24 then declares that these are the practices of the peoples of the land. The list of kinfolk with whom sex is to be avoided in verses 6–20 does not necessarily describe the customs of any particular people, but the cultic

prohibitions of verses 21 and 23 do describe activities popularly attributed to Canaanites by the Israelites.

The explicit condemnation of foreign practices in verse 24 would seem to imply cultic activity. Thus, it might appear that those particular cultic activities are the last three activities mentioned in the prohibition list: infant sacrifice, homosexuality, and sex with animals. Furthermore, the word "abomination," which is used in the text at this point, very often describes foreign behavior, especially cultic activity. If so, then what is condemned by the homosexual prohibition is not general homosexual behavior, but cultic homosexual relations in particular, and a strong indication of this may be that it follows the prohibition of infant sacrifice and precedes reference to sex with animals by women. The general reference to male homosexual activity might cause most people in the ancient Near East to think of cultic activity in the first place, and thus many commentators suspect this Levitical command addresses that issue. (Driver: 264; Horner 1978: 73; Boswell: 100–01; Nissinen: 41–44; Gagnon: 103, 130; Michaelson: 61–66). This is impossible to prove in a totally convincing fashion, because we are simply dealing with a list of prohibitions. But the possibility exists that this command describes cultic homosexuality, not general homosexuality.

If it does refer to simple homosexual behavior, then it is in the list because it represents a forbidden form of sexual activity with kinfolk and other sexual actions that do not produce healthy children according to their beliefs. It is worth pointing out, then, that the prohibition against homosexual behavior in verse 22 follows after a prohibition in verse 19 to avoid having sex with a woman during her menstrual period. It is interesting that opponents of homosexual behavior do not make an issue of this particular sexual behavior, which some people engage in for the sake of birth control. The Levitical sexual laws in general have their central focus upon maximizing the reproductive capacities of the ancient Israelites, because as a people they always faced a chronic population shortage. Levitical sexual laws condemn any sexual activity that wastes semen or any form of sexuality that does not seek procreation (Scroggs: 13). Some authors believe that this renders the homosexual prohibition irrelevant. Furthermore, Levitical laws do not address the question of female homoerotic behavior because such activity did not ultimately affect procreation, nor did it challenge male domination in any way (Nissinen: 43).

In Leviticus 20 we have another list of prohibitions comparable to the previous list. We read of prohibitions against the

Molech offering again (vv 3–5), against wizards (v 6), against cursing parents (v 9), against adultery (v 10), against sex with close relatives (vv 11–12, 17, 19–21), against sex with a woman and her daughter (v 14), against sex with animals (vv 15–16), against sex with a woman in her menstrual period (v 18), and then we find the prohibition against homosexual behavior and some other unusual customs in the midst of these other prohibitions. In Leviticus 20:13 we read, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.”

The later Jewish tradition believed that this law condemned pederasty because the first word is “man,” which implies an adult, but the second word is “male,” which permits the interpretation that the passive person is a youth (Scroggs: 72, 78–79). The earlier prohibition in Leviticus 18:22 would then apply to adults, even though the word used there is “male.” However, the word for “male” clearly means a masculine person as the use of the word in Genesis 1:27 indicates, for there it is paired with “female” (De Young: 52; Wold: 102–04).

However, there is another perspective that I would propose. This passage is immediately followed by the prohibition against having sex with both a mother and her daughter at the same time (v 14), which some have suspected of being a cultic activity. A comparable Hittite law (OH 191) from the early second millennium BCE permits such a sexual pairing if the two women are in separate parts of the country, but one cannot have sex together with them in the same location (Roth: 236). Hittite laws often were concerned with purity, and they forbid activities that attempted to be divinatory or engage in inappropriate cultic behavior. That this activity is accepted in one instance and rejected in the other hints that the latter activity is ritualistic.

The following prohibition condemns sex with animals for men (v 15) and sex with animals for women (v 16), which again may be a cultic activity. As in Leviticus 18, the idea of women having sex with animals on an everyday basis out on the farm seems very unusual; more likely this passage alludes to a specific ritual in the cult. If someone responds that we have no evidence of such a custom, my response is that there are many things that we do not know about in the ancient world. Comparable to the list in Leviticus 18, the homosexual prohibition occurs with other prohibitions that may condemn cultic religious behavior (McNeill: 57). We should be very cautious about using these prohibitions in the modern debate about homosexual behavior.

Some scholars propose a different interpretation. William

Stacy Johnson believes that these various sexual commands are directed to the leaders or fathers of extended family households with the purpose of prohibiting them from taking sexual advantage of people under their authority (Johnson 2006: 124–29, 2007: 172).

Saul Olyan has provided a significant contribution to the study of both of these texts. He has demonstrated with a philological analysis that the behavior described in these laws is anal intercourse, as indicated by the phrase “lying down with a man as with a woman” (179–206). Jerome Walsh builds upon Olyan’s argument and demonstrates that the law addresses the passive recipient in the sex act, for he lies with another man as with a woman, which means he performs the role of being the woman or the passive recipient for the other man. For Walsh, that means that a free, adult Israelite should not perform the role of being a passive recipient, like the woman’s role (205–07). Most people read the text and assume the law is telling the active partner not to use another man as a woman, but Walsh believes that the text is saying that a man should not perform the woman’s role. Walsh believes that this is the intended law in Leviticus 18:22, but that Leviticus 20:13 implicates both the active and the passive members in the relationship as worthy of death (208). Though neither Olyan nor Walsh suggests that cultic prostitution is involved, I believe that Walsh’s argument may imply it. The passive partner, who is condemned in Leviticus 18:22, is the cultic prostitute, and this might be the earlier version of the law. The later law in Leviticus 20:13 then condemns both the cultic prostitute and the devotee by decreeing that both should die. That the earlier law condemned only the passive partner implies that something is especially blameworthy about this role, and not simply that it is demeaning for a free male to assume this role. I believe the especially blameworthy nature of this passive sexual role in Leviticus 18:22 is that it is a form of cultic prostitution, and that is why the earlier form of the law condemned the only passive recipient and not the person who undertook the active penetration. The later law, which condemns both partners to death, is a stern attempt to destroy this cultic religious activity altogether.

It is worth pointing out that the action described in both of these passages is called a *to‘eba*, an “abomination.” “Abomination” is a term that can apply to many actions, both criminal and cultic in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy (child sacrifice, sorcery, adultery, cross dressing, murder, false oaths, oppressing the poor, charging interest, etc.). It was considered

to be a very serious violation of divinely given guidelines, and we today would consider some of these to be serious crimes (Wold: 110–14, 121–36, sees the laws in Leviticus 18 forbidding the transgression of kinship, gender, and species lines; De Young: 65–68). But it is usually used to describe those actions that bring impurity upon Israelites and destroy the identity of the Israelite as a chosen member of God's people. Though Christians may appropriate some of the moral guidelines of the book of Leviticus, we do not use all the purity guidelines, which were designed to make Israel an exclusive people. This creates a debate as to whether the homosexuality guidelines in Leviticus are purity guidelines that are no longer relevant for us (Via & Gagnon: 5–11). That this activity in Leviticus 18 is called an abomination is irrelevant, even though so many authors spend much verbiage on the issue, because the real question is what the text really condemns, whether it be all homosexual behavior or cultic homosexual behavior. If it is cultic homosexual behavior, we should not use it in the modern debate.

Cultic Prostitutes

As a final point in regard to First Testament texts, there are a number of passages that people have appealed to because the texts appear to condemn the presence of homosexual male priests in the Temple of Jerusalem. These are Deuteronomy 23:17–18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46, and 2 Kings 23:7. Deuteronomy 23:17–18 declares that neither men nor women of Israel can be "temple prostitutes," and the fee or the wages of prostitutes may not be used in payment for a vow. 1 Kings 14:24 refers to "male temple prostitutes" in the land of Judah. 1 Kings 15:12 states that king Asa of Judah "put away the male temple prostitutes" from Judah. 1 Kings 22:46 tells us that king Jehoshaphat of Judah "exterminated" the remnant of "male temple prostitutes" that his father Asa did not remove. Finally, 2 Kings 23:7 says that Josiah, king of Judah, "broke down the houses of the male temple prostitutes." First of all, it should be noted that a number of scholars suspect that "temple prostitutes" may be an incorrect translation for the Hebrew word, *kedeshim*. The word may really mean simply priests devoted to some particular deity in the worship cult, and perhaps their offensive identity is due to the fact that they are devoted to a deity other than Yahweh. Scholars suggest that we have no real solid evidence that such male prostitutes existed in either Mesopotamia or Israel, but rather the accusation of male prostitution was a rhetorical in-

sult one hurled at one's perceived opponents (Oden: 131–53; Bird 1997: 37–80, 2000: 146–61, 170–73). Some scholars, including myself, believe that they actually are temple prostitutes. James De Young and Robert Gagnon provide excellent arguments that they are male prostitutes (De Young: 40–43; Gagnon: 100–10). The second point is more important. Whatever these individuals are, they are clearly cultic prostitutes, and their behavior is condemned because they are cultic prostitutes, not homosexuals in general (Scroggs: 71). Female temple prostitutes dedicated to the goddess Asherah are also condemned, and no one concludes from this that heterosexuality is being condemned. Conservative critics often overlook that point. The sin is prostitution, not sexual identity, and the sin of prostitution is made abhorrent in the mind of the biblical author because it is done as a cultic activity, a form of worship, be it to Yahweh or a foreign deity.

It is worth responding to Robert Gagnon's extremely detailed work at this point. In his thorough evaluation of the homosexual texts in the First Testament, he concludes that the cultural and intellectual assumption behind those passages, especially the Levitical laws, is the belief that all male homosexual activity is evil. The condemnation of cultic male homosexuality is thus the condemnation of all homosexuality (Gagnon: 43–157, especially 130–31). He probably is correct about the cultural assumptions of that age and maybe even about the attitudes of the biblical authors. However, we theologize off of the texts, not the cultural assumptions of the age or something the biblical authors may have thought but did not write down. In the First Testament there are laws that seek to obtain rights for slaves and women, but the cultural assumptions of the age would denigrate the value of slaves and women. We see where the texts lead us, not where the cultural assumptions of the authors stood. Biblical texts often lead us beyond the values of the age in which they were written. That is obvious with passages concerning women and slaves. The homosexual texts are few in number; so it is not so obvious that we should ignore the greater cultural assumptions of the age. The homosexual texts, and the laws in particular, do not lead us anywhere; they simply prohibit certain forms of activity. But the bottom line is that we theologize off the texts, not our scholarly reconstruction of the cultural values of the authors. The texts appear to condemn rape and cultic prostitution, not generic homosexuality; we should not therefore conclude that all homosexual behavior is condemned (Stiebert & Walsh: 119–52).

Second Testament Vice Lists

In the Second Testament there are two “vice lists” containing words that supposedly mean “homosexual.” Vice lists and virtue lists are rhetorical devices used by Second Testament authors to give moral advice to Christians by calling attention to the bad behavior of unbelievers, to the bad behavior Christians still might have, or to the virtues to which Christians should aspire (Elliott: 21–23; R. A. Lopez: 59–73). Vice lists, in particular, are often an interesting mix of really horrid activities, such as murder and slave trading, with the everyday vices that most people have, such as greed, envy, and gossip. I suspect that many of the vice lists may have the purpose of condemning the everyday common vices of people by including them in lists with very sinful activities. The horrid vices would then be a foil for the author to really imply that Christians should seek to overcome greed, gossip, and envy.

Thus, in Paul’s letters, for example, Romans 1:29–30 lists wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, **envy**, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, **gossips**, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, **haughty, boastful**, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless; Romans 13:13 lists reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and **jealousy**; Galatians 5:19–21 lists fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, **jealousy, anger**, quarrels, dissensions, factions, **envy**, drunkenness, and carousing; 1 Corinthians 5:10 lists **greedy**, robbers, idolaters; and 1 Corinthians 5:11 lists sexually immoral, **greedy**, idolater, reviler, drunkard, and robber. In other Second Testament literature, Mark 7:21–22 lists fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, **envy, slander, pride**, folly; and Revelation 21:8 lists cowardly, faithless, polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, **liars**. In regard to the two lists under consideration, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 lists fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, **greedy**, drunkards, revilers, robbers; and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 lists lawless, disobedient, godless, **sinful**, unholy, profane, murderers of father or mother, murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, **liars**, perjurers. Words like envy, haughty, gossips, boastful, jealously, anger, greedy, sinful, slander, pride, and liars describe everyone. A vice list can sometimes use extreme examples of evil behavior to condemn the common sinful activities of everyone in order to declare that all sin is significant and requires repentance, forgiveness, and commitment

to good behavior. Some vice lists may be designed to really condemn the common vices we all share. The two lists that include homosexual behavior appear to belong to this category. I believe it is theologically inappropriate to rely heavily on passages for an important moral debate that are simply being used for a rhetorical theological purpose and are listing single words for rhetorical effect.

The words that supposedly mean “homosexual” in these lists may actually mean something else, and this makes the use of these texts in the homosexual debate among Christians today very tenuous. The two passages in question are 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The text in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 reads as follows:

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

The first thing to notice is the unevenness of the list. As noted above, the vice of “greed” is thrown in with some serious activities to get the audience to pay attention to their own greed, and the other serious vices are listed for effect.

The two words that have been translated as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” in the New Revised Standard Version have been understood in the past to refer to homosexuals in general. But this translation seeks to indicate that the words may have a more specialized meaning and do not refer to all homosexual behavior.

The word for “male prostitute” in Greek is *malaḱoi*, a word that literally means “soft person” or “passive one.” It may refer to the receptive, penetrated partner in sexual relations between men. Literally the biblical word simply means “soft,” and it is often used with that simple meaning, as in “soft” clothing (Matt 11:8; Luke 7:25). In some literature of the Graeco-Roman era it refers to those who wore make-up, dressed as women, shaved their bodies, and indeed took a passive role in sex, men and boys who allowed themselves to be used sexually as the passive partner in a homosexual relationship, usually for money, hence the translation of “male prostitute.” It could also mean a slave who is used by his master as the passive recipient in a sexual relationship. However, in some Greek literature it can mean general moral laxity, licentiousness, or wanton behavior with no explicit reference to homosexual acts (Boswell: 106–07, 339–41; Fee: 243–44;

McNeill: 52; Elliott: 23–28, provides the most detailed analysis; Michaelson: 88). In the most general terms, it means softness, soft clothing, rich food, a gentle breeze, laziness, weakness, moral laxity, and a person who was effeminate, physically soft, or was a sissy, or did not appreciate education or warfare, or had too much sex with women (how ironic!) (Martin: 124–26; Via and Gagnon: 11–12; Elliott: 23–28). Perhaps, the word was used as slang to describe an effeminate person, such as a boy prostitute or a boy slave (Scroggs: 42, 62–65; Elliott: 27; Johnson 2007: 167). In this passage, it might specify a young teen-aged boy used for sexual purposes (Waetjen: 109; Richie: 723–29). Or perhaps, at the other end of the spectrum, in this passage it simply may mean, “debauched individual” (McNeil: 56). Ultimately, none of these are sexual relationships in which love is present.

The word for “sodomites” is the Greek word *arsenokōitai*, which literally means “men who go to bed.” This word does not occur prior to Paul in Greek literature; after Paul Christian authors occasionally used the term to describe general sexual activity (McNeill: 52–53; Scroggs: 107; Gagnon: 314). John Boswell surveyed Christian authors and observed that this word is hardly ever used to describe homosexual behavior (342–50). In Rom 13:13 Paul uses the term *kōitai* by itself to simply mean excessive sexual activity, so we might wish to be a little cautious in attributing specific meanings to the mind of Paul in regard to the word *arsenokōitai* (McNeill: 53; Nissinen: 114–16).

If we consider the word by itself, we may note that the two words *arseno* (“man”) and *kōiten* (“intercourse”) occur as separate words in the commands of Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 as it is found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. We might assume that Jews, or perhaps even Paul, made up the Greek word *arsenokōitai*, inspired by the Greek text of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (Scroggs: 83, 107–08; Waetjen: 109–10; Wold: 189–94; De Young: 195–99; Gagnon: 315; Via & Gagnon: 12–13), though some scholars think not (Nissinen: 116). Paul may have coined the term, but its quick use in a list of vices implies that he believed that his audience was familiar with the term, so it probably arose in Greek speaking Jewish circles (Frederickson: 220).

Since the word means the active male partner in the text of Leviticus 18:22, according to Jewish interpretation, we could assume that the word has the same meaning for Paul. If *arsenokōitai* refers to the active partners in sexual relationships (which “sodomite” historically meant), then it may be a word

used to describe older men who have sex with young boys (Scroggs: 72, 107–09; McNeil: 52; Elliott: 30–32; Siker: 883; Richie 723–29). It could additionally mean a sexually rapacious individual (Michaelson: 92). Dale Martin argues cogently that the meaning in some 2nd century CE Christian texts, such as *Sibylline Oracle* 2.70–77 and *Acts of John*, section 36, where the term is listed with forms of economic oppression and not sexuality, implies that the term means someone who victimizes a poor person in a sexual fashion, such as a slave or a young boy (120–23). In our understanding, this word would mean “pederast” regardless of who is correct in the discussion.

We sense that the young boy in the Graeco-Roman world, either a free male attached to an older male, or a young slave boy being sexually abused by his master, would not be in what we would call a loving relationship. Other scholars, however, believe the word refers to men who were freed slaves, who now offered their bodies for money as male prostitutes rather than being forced to submit to sex, as happened when they formerly were slaves, so that the word would mean “male prostitutes.” (Boswell: 107, 341–44; Johnson 2007: 167).

When we put both words together, *arsenokōitai* and *malakoi*, we have the two words that describe the homosexual relationships that would have been observed most frequently by Paul. These were the master, old man, abusive sexual partner, or pederast on the one hand, and the slave, young boy, or victim on the other hand. That is why Paul pairs them in this sentence; they may be euphemisms for the active and the passive participants in a sexual relationship (Horner 1974: 89–90; Elliott: 32, 34, especially pairs them; Siker: 883; Gagnon: 316; Pizzuto: 167). Ultimately, I believe both words describe abusive sexual relationships, not loving relationships between two adult, free males.

The other vice list which critics of homosexuality like to quote is located in 1 Timothy 1:9–10, and it reads as follows:

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

Notice again, the word “liars,” a common sin, is found in the list to catch the attention of the listener or the reader of this

text. The word used in this passage, so often quoted to condemn homosexuality, is “sodomites.” The Greek word is again *arsenokoitai*, a word that might mean “pederast.” So again, this vice probably does not describe general homosexual behavior. The word used prior to *arsenokoitai* is “fornicators,” a word commonly used in the Greek world for prostitutes. In this particular text, there might be a connection in that the *arsenokoitai* are the people who use the prostitutes for sexual pleasures. The word that follows both of these words is “slave traders,” and “slave traders” are the ones who kidnap and sell young boys as “prostitutes” to the *arsenokoitai*. Perhaps, there is a connection between all three words to describe the sexual phenomena of the Greco-Roman world (Scroggs: 119–20). Homosexual love between two adult, free males or females may not be described here.

The New Revised Standard Versions translates these two words in both passages as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites,” giving them a specialized meaning. The New King James Version and the New American Bible translate these words likewise. However, the old King James Version and the New International Version translate the words as “homosexuals,” so that readers of those translations will quote their bibles emphatically to condemn homosexuality.

It is also worth pointing out that the ancient world did not have our understanding of homosexual and heterosexual. In fact, the term “homosexual” originated only in the 19th century. Our understanding of homosexual would be somewhat related to their understanding of the passive male partner in a sexual relationship with another male, and they had great disdain for such a person. Their understanding of the active partner in a same-sex male relationship would more be equivalent to our definition of heterosexual (Carden: 83–96). They believed that a powerful sexual male would have sex with both men and women, and animals too, if the situation arose. Thus, both in the Assyrian armies of the 8th and 7th centuries BCE and in the Roman armies of the New Testament era, the soldiers would routinely rape male prisoners from armies they had defeated in battle. This was a political statement of victory and total power over the defeated enemy (Johnson 2007: 163). These armies did not recruit only gay men. This was power rape, and it did not define a soldier as homosexual in our sense of the word. Their equivalent definitions of homosexual and heterosexual, if they even had anything like these notions, were altogether different from our own. It makes our use of these Second Testament passages inappropriate. The

Second Testament is condemning the violent use of sex to degrade and humiliate people, not sexual inclinations.

Romans 1

A conservative critic of homosexual behavior once said to me, “If all those other passages can be shown to be irrelevant to the homosexual debate, at least I have one certain biblical text that clearly condemns homosexuality.” He, of course, was referring to Romans 1:26–27. I now reproduce Romans 1:22–27, for I believe you need the entire context to see what Paul is really saying. Romans 1:22–27 reads as follows:

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a moral human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and 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.

The popular opponent of homosexuality quotes the last two verses and declares that here we have a clear condemnation of both male and female homosexuality. I respond by saying we must observe how verse 26 begins. The words are “for this reason.” That initial statement means that the homosexual behavior is the result of the idolatry described in the previous verses. In other words, the idolatry and the homosexual behavior go together and describe the same people. Sophisticated critics of homosexual behavior do indeed observe this also. But the point I wish to make is that Paul is not speaking about all homosexuals; he is speaking about a specific group of homosexuals who engage in a particular form of idolatrous worship.

The idolatry that is described is the theriomorphic representation of God or the gods. Theriomorphic means representing something in the form of an animal. Paul says that this group of people portrays God or their gods as animals, as birds, four-footed animals, or reptiles in verse 23, and he repeats the

notion again in verse 25 when he says that they worship the creature. Then in verse 26 Paul says that because of this worship activity these people are given over to homoerotic behavior. In particular, he notes that the men "give up" natural heterosexual love for homosexual love. Who is Paul describing?

The only group of people in the Mediterranean area who portrayed their gods as animals were the Egyptians. In Rome the significant imported Egyptian cult was the worship of the goddess Isis. Isis was portrayed as a human female, but her son Horus was portrayed as a falcon. Other accompanying Egyptian deities were portrayed as an ibis (Thoth), a cow (Hathor sometimes), a lioness (Tefnut), a ram (Khnum) a hippopotamus (Tawaret and Seth sometimes), a cat (Bastet), a jackal or dog (Anubis), a crocodile (Sobek), a beetle (Khepri), etc. Isis was called the "queen of heaven" and she was portrayed as a gracious mother to Horus and a deity who loved humanity. In the public and very flamboyant cultic processions at Rome, Isis priests carried images of animal-faced gods and other unusual objects, including a golden urn with sacred water from the Nile. Lucius Apuleius, in his classical work, *The Golden Ass*, observed Anubis portrayed as a dog and another deity in the image of cow, which was probably Hathor, in a colorful Isis parade (Apuleius: 556–57). Devotees in these parades frequently stopped at altars along the roads with their sumptuous and magnificent displays, thus making quite an impression on common Romans (Cumont: 97). Lucius Apuleius provided at length a vivid description of his vision of Isis and the spectacular Isis parade (Apuleius: 543–67). The average Roman would have been familiar with the theriomorphic imagery for the gods to which Paul alludes, and Paul's Roman audience would immediately have thought of them when he alluded to animals in his initial statements.

I must ask myself what Paul's Roman audience would have heard in their imagination as this letter was read publicly to them. As Romans, the animal references would have made them think of the Isis cult, and the following language by Paul would continue to be connected to the Isis cult in their minds. I will not ask what Paul thought of homosexuality; I will ask what his audience heard when he wrote what he did, and I am sure that Paul intended for them to think of the Isis cult.

Commentators generally pay little attention to Paul's references to animals. Bernadette Brooten noted that Paul's allusions most likely were inspired by the Egyptian deities. She also drew the parallel with Wisdom 15:18–19 and the Jewish philosopher Judaeus Philo (*On the Decalogue* 76–80),

authors who condemned the use of animals as the images for God (231–32). Brooten, however, did not draw the conclusion that Paul may have been describing the Isis cult in Rome. Both Philo and the author of *Wisdom of Solomon* lived in Egypt and so were quite familiar with theriomorphic images. *Wisdom* 15:18 says that the foolish (v 14) "worship even the most hated animals, which are worse than all others." Paul might have shared the invective of *Wisdom of Solomon* and Philo on this matter, for he was apparently familiar at least with the former work.

In the Isis cult, male priests had to abstain from sexual activity during ceremonies and festivals, and there were virgin priestesses who did not marry. Lucius Apuleius in his ancient literary work implied that the male priests permanently practiced chastity, and for him that was too great a burden to bear, so he could not become an Isis priest after his dramatic conversion (Apuleius: 570–71). Perpetual sexual abstinence by men would not be viewed favorably in the moral climate of Rome, where so much emphasis was placed upon the family. Paul's reference to men who give up their sexuality might describe sexually abstinent priests (who then presumably could love only each other, according to the popular gossip of Romans), and the snide comment about the women loving each other might be a reference to the priestesses, who were supposed to be virgin.

Notice, however, that Paul does not say that the women directly loved other women; we assume that. What he says is that women gave up natural love for unnatural love, which could mean unusual sexual behavior with men or some other form of sexual behavior that does not procreate. We do not know for sure what he means. Some critical scholars have made a good argument that Paul is condemning non-coital heterosexual activity by these women (Miller 1995: 1–11; Debel: 39–64).

Significantly, lesbian women are mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, presumably because female same-sex did not offend. It did not involve penetration, it did not humiliate a man, either a slave, prisoner of war, or a youth, and it did not ultimately affect procreation. Thus, it did not affect male pride. Why does Paul even mention it here? Why does he mention it before male homoerotic behavior? I believe he is thinking of mystery cult priestesses, and in particular, the priestesses of Isis, who were very visible in Rome during their Isis celebrations. A critique of the Isis cult would begin with them. The fact that Paul mentions women before men is important, I be-

lieve. Some scholars might counter my argument by pointing out that traditional Roman piety particularly despised female homoeroticism and Paul may be speaking to female homosexuality in general (Jewett: 231–32). But this traditional Roman attitude might have further encouraged Paul to imply that Isis priestesses were engaging in behavior that offended traditional Roman piety.

Romans, in general, did not like the cult of Isis. Its ethics often encouraged greater sexual freedom among devotees, even though abstinence for priests during festivals was advocated, and this sexual license offended many Romans. Under Caesar Tiberius (15–37 CE) the Isis priests in Rome were arrested and crucified, the temple of Isis was dismantled, and followers were expelled from the city in 19 CE (Angus: 38; Danker: 3:95). In the early years of its presence in Rome, the Roman senate ordered Serapis and Isis shrines destroyed in 59, 58, 53, and 48 BCE due to its corrupting influences, its loose morality, and the emotional piety connected to it. Caligula gave the Isis movement a protected status, and the movement began to rebound in the next generation thereafter (Cumont: 81). Paul's letter was written at a time when the Isis cult was growing in popularity despite the hostility of many Romans. Thus, if Paul was writing the letter to the Romans, a group of folk he had not yet visited, it would have been politic for him to condemn something as a form of immoral behavior that he knew most Romans did not like in the first place. That would be politic rhetoric on his part. Paul himself might have despised the Isis cult for its similarity to Christianity, for it spoke of a god, Osiris or Serapis, who died and was yet alive, the forgiveness of sins provided by Isis, and devotees who would experience immortality with Osiris in the afterlife. Thus, I believe that Paul is not condemning homosexuality in general; he is condemning the Isis cult. I know that I cannot convince many scholars with this argument, but I offer it as a thought provoking suggestion.

Other scholars suggest that Paul may be loosely condemning a wide range of goddess cults of the ancient Mediterranean world, all of which had followers in Rome. Goddesses, such as Cybele from Asia Minor (with dramatically castrated priests who carried their testicles in their hands), Diana from Ephesus, and Aphrodite (Greece)/Venus (Rome) had eunuch priests and virgin priestesses as votaries in their service. Romans, in general, were critical of these cults. In fact, the existence of such temple servants can be found in Sumerian texts from the third millennium BCE. These texts describe *gala*

priests and *assinu* priests who engaged in anal sex with worshippers who came to the temples. The word *assinu* combines the Sumerian symbols for dog and woman, which probably gave rise to the slang in both Hebrew and Greek that called a male prostitute a “dog.” The *assinu* priest may have been castrated. The male prostitute might have assumed the posture of a dog in the sexual act, hence the insulting nickname in the ancient world and in the Bible. In Greece the priests were called *galli* priests, and, in particular, the cult of Cybele in Turkey had such priests. Cybele was assimilated to Atargatis, a mother goddess in Syria, who was virtually identical to Ishtar, so there is continuity in all these traditions (Nissinen: 31–32). These priests believed that their self-castration enabled them to become more like their gods, an idea that particularly would have horrified Paul. His references to men giving up desire for women might be a loose reference to the self-castration practiced in some cults like that of Attis and Cybele, where the self-castration occurred during moments of ecstasy and the priests then carried their recently severed testicles around in their hands as a demonstration of their piety. Since Attis and Cybele devotees were found in Galatia, he might readily recall this folk from his mission work there. In Galatians 5:12 he desires that his opponents from Jerusalem would “castrate” themselves,” and this might be a sarcastic allusion to the Attis priests which the Galatian audience would appreciate. Perhaps Paul alludes to self-castration when he says they “received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (v 27)

The cultic activity connected to Isis devotion, as well as other goddesses, proliferated in the Mediterranean world between the 4th century BCE and the 3rd century CE. Thus, Paul's diatribe in Romans 1:18–32 may be about such idolatrous religions in general, and verses 26–27 may attack the sex practices connected to worship. What Paul would find offensive about this cultic behavior, besides the obvious worship of other gods, is that the sexual behavior did not bring about procreation, and that is what makes it “unnatural.”

Paul has a broad definition for “unnatural,” for in Romans 4:18 he speaks of how God grafts the wild olive branch onto the domestic grape vine as “unnatural.” So his use of the word is not exclusively in sexual categories (McNeill: 53). However, conservative commentators have analyzed how Paul uses the concept of “unnatural” and observed that he very often uses it for serious moral offenses, including sexual activity (Wold: 177–86; De Young: 142–64). Paul would certainly view the activity of the Isis devotees to be most “unnatural.” Jeremy

Townsley also believes that Paul is condemning the sexual actions of the mystery religions in general with this concept, not any form of sexual orientation, for in that age people did not think in terms of sexual orientation such as heterosexual or homosexual; they thought in terms of actions (707–28). Paul would have seen the activities in so many of these mystery cults as “unnatural.” It has also been observed that Paul may have been guilty of a category mistake; he may have confused “unnatural” with what were really merely the “customs” of his age (Phipps 128–31). Ultimately, I believe too much energy is spent on trying to understand what Paul meant by “unnatural” in regard to the modern homosexuality debate, because the more important question is what is he actually describing. If he is speaking of cultic sexuality, then it is irrelevant for the modern debate. This is especially true if the allusion to the women is actually referring to “unnatural” heterosexual activity.

Robert Gagnon’s comprehensive evaluation of this text demands a short response. He believes that Paul is speaking generally of all same-sex activity. One of his arguments suggests that in Romans 1 Paul subtly alludes to Genesis 1:27, where heterosexual marriage is instituted. When Paul speaks of birds, four-footed animals and reptiles in Romans 1:23, the two Greek words that he uses for “birds” and reptiles” are the same words that the Greek Septuagint used in Genesis 1:26; and the words that he uses for “females” and “males” are the same words used in the Greek translation of Genesis 1:27 (Gagnon: 290–91), which is a foundational text for marriage and heterosexual union. Gagnon believes that by alluding to Genesis 1 and its clear description of the heterosexual relationship between the man and the woman, Paul thereby condemns any homoerotic behavior. In response, I would note that to say Paul was inspired by Genesis 1 is a good observation. I believe that Paul might have drawn upon the animal language of Genesis 1 for two of the words in his invective against the Isis cult. I would respond to Gagnon that all three words used by Paul, “birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles,” directly correspond to animals revered as theriomorphic images of the Egyptian gods in the Isis cult. The words for “male” and “female” used by Paul would be normal words used to describe people. That the language in Romans 1 is similar to Genesis 1 I don’t doubt, but I believe the real correspondence is between this language and the cult of Isis in Rome.

Gagnon mounts a convincing argument that Judeans in Paul’s day would have condemned all forms of homosexuality, especially demonstrated in the very extensive writings of Phi-

lo and Josephus, and Gagnon firmly believes that Paul shared those convictions. Martti Nissinen also observes the same values in the writings of Philo, Josephus and other Judean authors in this era (89–102). As Gagnon reads Romans 1, he extrapolates Paul’s condemnation of the particular activity described in this text to conclude that Paul used this language to condemn all same-sex activities (Gagnon: 159–83, 229–303; so also M. D. Smith: 223–56). Even if Gagnon is correct, as stated earlier, we theologize off of the biblical texts, not the reconstructed intellectual and religious values of that culture. Sometimes such scholarly speculation is helpful on particular issues, and it can inspire preachers in their sermonizing, but we cannot routinely theologize for significant church positions using our scholarly conclusions about the probable beliefs of biblical authors.

I creatively suggest what the thinking of biblical authors might have been in my biblical commentaries and writings frequently, but I would not wish for my views to be enshrined as official theology for any denomination. They are scholarly opinions, and scholarly opinions change over the years. Would we theologize off of the biblical authors’ general understandings of slavery, women, and war, or would we rather see what the texts in particular say about those issues? Often the biblical texts lead us to look beyond the mere cultural assumptions of the age in which they were articulated. Would we ask Paul or extrapolate from his culturally conditioned beliefs what he felt about using medicine, flying in airplanes, or how the universe was constructed? More relevant, would we ask Paul his opinion about having sex with our wife in her non-fertile period? I mention that last example because conservative critics often say that we can bracket Paul’s scientific views as part of the learning of that age, but matters of sexuality have eternal value and should not be dismissed as culturally conditioned. But in reality, we do believe differently from the biblical authors on certain moral issues because of the great cultural chasm between us and them. The church and individual denominations should craft official theology off the biblical texts, not our scholarly reconstructions of their thought. Of course, for many Christians, theology is also crafted off natural knowledge, the reigning philosophical paradigm, human existential need, and inner spiritual insight. All the more should such theologians be cautious about making biblical texts say more than they actually did.

Finally, there are other ways of interpreting these passages in Romans 1. There are scholars who suggest that Paul is describing homosexual behavior outside the cult. Some suggest

that he is describing the sexual activities of the rich and powerful Romans of that age who engaged in degenerate sexual activity and forced slaves to do their sexual bidding. Thus, what is being described is slave sex and sexual abuse of slaves and young children, and that abuse of people is what makes it so evil. Idolatry permits that kind of immoral behavior. Many of the Christians in Paul's Roman audience were probably male slaves forced into submissive sex by their masters as a statement of the superior status the master held. They would resonate strongly with Paul's angry language (Furnish: 52–83; Scroggs: 115–18; Hultgren: 315–25; Jewett: 238–40). Some believe that Paul's audience would have immediately thought of pederasty when they heard these lines, because that was so common and so abusive (Miller 1997: 861–66). It has also been suggested that Paul is describing homosexual behavior in this passage as an example of Gentile "unclean-ness" but not necessarily sin; it is an impurity resulting from idol worship (Countryman: 104–23; Kalin: 423–32). It has been hypothesized that Paul condemns not so much homosexual behavior as the unbridled lust that occurs in such contexts (Frederickson: 177–222). Perhaps, Paul simply modeled his discourse after the popular understanding of the Sodom story in his age in order to talk about Gentile sin in general (Esler: 4–16). Many ideas have been suggested in this regard.

The conservative who sees verses 26–27 as a condemnation of homosexual behavior sometimes maintain that Paul is really pointing out two different forms of immoral behavior, idolatry and homosexuality in this chapter. I, however, point adamantly to the expression, "for this reason," which connects the idolatry and the homosexuality by implying that the idolatry led to the homosexual behavior. We must think in terms of the idolatry that Paul may be describing and connect it to the sexual activity he criticizes. Too often folks who quote this passage simply speak of idolatry in general and move quickly to the sexual characterizations.

We need to pay attention to the theriomorphic imagery connected to the worship of other gods. If Paul is making a significant statement with his references to animals, then the Isis cult comes immediately to mind. Furthermore, Paul is correct in making the connection between the animal image idolatry and the sexual activity. The Isis religion with its theriomorphic imagery, as well as the other goddess religions, indeed did mandate that sometimes male priests be castrated and the priestesses be perpetually virgin. That Paul was referring to either the Isis religion or one of the other god-

dess cults is borne out by the testimony of the 3rd century CE church father Hippolytus who links the references in Romans 1:26–27 with castrated priests in these other religions, which he still observed in his own age (Townsley: 723). My thesis is not unique; Hippolytus beat me to it eighteen centuries ago. In this passage, I believe, Paul's description of idolatry is very closely connected to the sexual practices he condemns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that there is no passage in the biblical text that truly condemns a sexual relationship between two adult, free people, who truly love each other. This, of course, does not settle the debate, for there still remain the views found in the history of the Christian tradition, the official pronouncements of church bodies, and the scientific discussion of gender identity. I cannot discuss those issues. But I would maintain that the biblical texts should not be called forth in the condemnation of gay and lesbian people in our society today.

There are those voices today, especially among my college students and among intelligentsia in general, who declare that the Bible is an oppressive book because it supported slavery, and it still suppresses women and condemns gays. I say that this is not true whenever I have the opportunity; I try to teach the students otherwise. That is one of the reasons for writing this article. Maybe I am defending the Bible against its critics as much as I am defending the rights of gay and lesbian individuals.

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