

Homosexuality and the Old Testament

P. Michael Ukleja

Only towering cynicism can pretend that there is any doubt about what the Scriptures say about homosexuality. The Bible has not even the slightest hint of ambiguity about what is permitted or forbidden in this aspect of sexual conduct.

God loves people and wants them to come to the wholeness and joy for which they were made. His prohibitions are not the house rules of a sadistic and capricious Deity who mocks mankind by tormenting him with desires and then forbidding him from doing anything about them.

Biblical prohibitions are bright signposts that point people straight toward fullness and joy. They warn people away from spiritual and emotional detours, mires, quicksand, and cliffs. All sexual sins represent some failure on society's part to stick to God's path. Fornication fails to honor the image of God in the other person, for it sees the other only as a commodity. Adultery violates the shrine of marital fidelity which houses and keeps sacred the sexual expression. Incest is the effort to achieve union with an image too close to oneself. The relationship is not sufficiently "other" to make the transaction valid. Bestiality is the effort to achieve union with an image too different from oneself. Masturbation, while not explicitly cited in Scripture as sin, involves a failure to appreciate fully the use of sex which is surely more than a matter of mere orgasm. And homosexuality is a confusion, since it involves the effort of achieving union with a "mirror" image of oneself. This "other" is not sufficiently differ-

ent to permit the union for which mankind was so remarkably formed.

Homosexuality and the Sin of Sodom

Two angels who came to Lot in Sodom were threatened by a mob (Gen. 19:4-11). What were the men of Sodom seeking when they called on Lot to bring out the men "that we may know them" (19:5, KJV)? Some conclude that the story has no reference to homosexual acts at all. Bailey seeks to justify homosexuality from the Old Testament in his work *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*.¹ Others (for example, Boswell²) use Bailey's arguments concerning this passage. Bailey was an Anglican scholar whose work influenced the change in British law regarding this issue. This work is fast becoming a standard reference work for the prohomosexual viewpoint.

Bailey believes that much of Christian prejudice against homosexuality is the result of misunderstanding the story of Sodom in Genesis 19. He argues that the men of Sodom were anxious to interrogate the strangers to find out if they were spies. Therefore, he argues, the story does not refer to homosexuality at all. The sin involved was not homosexuality, but gang rape. Lot had angered these residents by receiving foreigners whose credentials had not been examined. The men were angered by this omission, and were showing extreme discourtesy to these visitors by demanding to know their credentials.³ Bailey argues that the demand of the men of Sodom to "know" the strangers in Lot's house meant nothing more than their desire to "get acquainted with" them. The problem, argues Bailey, was nothing more than inhospitality. Others, including Blair, have expanded on this argument.

The Biblical story demonstrates the seriousness with which these early Eastern people took the important customs of Oriental hospitality. It appears that, if necessary, they would even allow their own daughters to undergo abuse in order to protect guests. The sexual aspect of the story is simply the vehicle in which the subject of demanded hospitality is conveyed. It is clearly interpreted in Ezekiel 16:49: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."⁴

The Hebrew word for "know" (יָדָע), Bailey points out, can be translated "to get acquainted with" or "to have knowledge of" or

"to have intercourse with." The word **יָדָע** appears over 943 times in the Old Testament and only 12 times does it mean "to have intercourse with." He also states that intercourse, as a means to personal knowledge, depends on more than copulation. Therefore, he argues, the circumstances in Sodom could not fit the sexual connotation of the word "know." He concludes by reasoning from the fact that Lot was a **גֵּר**, a resident foreigner. As such, Lot had exceeded his rights by receiving two foreigners whose credentials had not been examined.⁵

The first problem with this argument is the fact that the meaning of a word in a given passage is not determined solely on the basis of the number of times it is translated that way in the Bible. The context determines how it is to be translated. Of the 12 times the word **יָדָע** occurs in Genesis, 10 times it means "to have intercourse with." Kidner offers the following rebuttal to Bailey's arguments.

To this we may reply: (a) Statistics are no substitute for contextual evidence (otherwise the rarer sense of the word would never seem probable), and in both these passages the demand to "know" is used in its sexual sense (Gn. 19:8; Jdg. 19:25). Even apart from this verbal conjunction it would be grotesquely inconsequent that Lot should reply to a demand for credentials by an offer of daughters. (b) Psychology can suggest how "to know" acquired its secondary sense; but in fact the use of the word is completely flexible. No one suggests that in Judges 19:25 the men of Gibeah were gaining "knowledge" of their victim in the sense of personal relationship, yet "know" is the word used of them. (c) Conjecture here has the marks of special pleading for it substitutes a trivial reason ("commotion . . . inhospitality") for a serious one for the angels' decision. Apart from this, it is silenced by Jude 7, a pronouncement which Dr. Bailey has to discount as belonging to a late stage of interpretation.⁶

The whole scene in Genesis 19 takes on near-comic proportions if Lot, on hearing the demand of the crowd that they wished to "get acquainted with" the men in his house, said, "Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not known a man; please let me bring them out to you and do to them as is good in your sight, only do nothing to these men. . ." (author's translation). In verse 8 the same verb, **יָדָע**, with the negative particle is used to describe Lot's daughters as having "not known" a man. The verb here obviously means "have intercourse with." It could hardly mean simply "be acquainted with." In narrative literature of this sort it would be very unlikely to use one verb with two different meanings so close together

unless the author made the difference quite obvious. In both verses 5 and 8 **ׁ7** should be translated "to have sexual intercourse with." The context does not lend itself to any other credible interpretation.

Jude 7 gives a commentary on this passage. It clearly states that the sin of Sodom involved gross immorality and going after strange or different flesh (**sarxoj eteraj**). It is no accident that Jude describes their actions by using **ekporneusasai**. The verb **porneuw** definitely refers to sexual immorality and the preposition **ek** explains that it means that "they gave themselves up fully, without reserve, thoroughly, out and out, utterly."⁷ The term "strange flesh" could imply unnatural acts between men or even of human beings with animals. The inhabitants of Canaan were guilty of both of these sins (Lev. 18:23-29). This definitely includes the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. History and archaeology confirm these same conditions. Josephus, who wrote around A.D. 99-100, said that the Sodomites "hated strangers and abused themselves with sodomitical practices."⁸

Boswell says that Lot was following local customs in offering his daughters to appease the angry mob. "No doubt the surrender of his daughters was simply the most tempting bribe Lot could offer on the spur of the moment to appease the hostile crowd. . . . This action, almost unthinkable in modern Western society, was consonant with the very low status of female children at the time. . . ." ⁹ But what Lot did was not right. Just because Lot offered his daughters to them in accordance with local customs does not mean that his action was morally acceptable in God's sight. It is much more probable that Lot's offer was motivated by the thought that however wrong rape is, homosexual rape was even worse. Lot's offer was simply what he thought to be the lesser of two evils.

Homosexuality and the Mosaic Law

THE INJUNCTIONS IN THE LAW

God's command concerning homosexuality is clear: "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination (Lev. 18:22). This is expanded in Leviticus 20:13. "If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act. . . ." These passages are set in the context of God's judgment on sexual crimes and are an expansion of the seventh commandment.

Moses was not trying to establish an exhaustive code on the subject of sexuality; rather he was dealing with certain gross offenses of the seventh commandment that were common in the nations surrounding Israel at the time.

Prohomosexual advocates usually dismiss these passages by relegating them to simple religious prohibitions rather than taking them as moral prohibitions. Blair exhibits this line of reasoning.

That the very pronounced Old Testament judgment against a man's having sexual relations with another man is included in the priestly Holiness Code of Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) is significant because the concern of the priests was one of ritual purity. It was not the moral preaching of the prophets. From this priestly point of view, it is clear that above all else, Israel was to be uncontaminated by her pagan neighbors. In all things, she was to remain a separate "pure vessel unto the Lord." At this time, male prostitutes in the temples of the Canaanites, Babylonians, and other neighboring peoples, were common features of the pagan rites. There, it is understandable that this "homosexuality" connected with the worship of false gods would certainly color Israel's perspective on any and all homosexual activity.¹⁰

Blair, and those who follow his line of thinking, assume that ritual purity and moral preaching are always distinct. Therefore the passages in Leviticus, they argue, are not really speaking against homosexuality as such, but only against identifying with the practice of alien religions. The issue was religious identity, not the righteousness of God.

But this type of reasoning begs the question on several counts. The first major fault is in assuming that ritual purity and moral purity are always distinct. Those who make this dichotomy argue that Leviticus 18 and 20 cannot be of an ethical or moral nature. Blair states this when he divides the priests with their ritual purity and the prophets with their moral teaching into two groups that were not to transgress each other's territory. But the prophets preached to the needs of their day. Anything not included in their teaching is more logically explained by that particular sin's absence among the sins of that generation, rather than by a rigid distinction between ceremonial and moral purity. To hold to such a distinction one would have to conclude that adultery was not morally wrong (18:20), child sacrifice had no moral implications (18:21), and that nothing is inherently evil with bestiality (18:23). The point is that ceremonial purity and moral purity often coincide.

These passages, again, are consistent with God's purpose for human sexuality, as presented in Genesis 1-3. When these passages are studied, it becomes obvious that God's purpose is to preserve the sanctity of marriage and the home.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE LAW

Prohomosexual advocates spend much effort and time trying to show the irrelevance of the Law to Christians today. Scanzoni and Mollenkott are an example of this. "Consistency and fairness would seem to dictate that if the Israelite Holiness Code is to be invoked against twentieth-century homosexuals, it should likewise be invoked against such common practices as eating rare steak, wearing mixed fabrics, and having marital intercourse during the menstrual period."¹¹ Blair follows Scanzoni and Mollenkott in arguing that the Old Testament Law must be thrown out when seeking a guide to the issue of homosexuality.

It is interesting how lightly evangelicals have taken other proscriptions found in the same Old Testament Code, e.g.: rules against the eating of rabbit (Lev. 11:26), oysters, clams, shrimp, and lobster (Lev. 11:10ff), and rare steaks (Lev. 17:10). Evangelicals do not picket or try to close down seafood restaurants nor do we keep kosher kitchens. We do not always order steaks "well-done." We eat pork and ham. The wearing of clothes made from interwoven linen and wool (Deut. 22:11) does not seem to bother us at all. Evangelicals do not say, in accordance with these same laws of cultic purification (Lev. 20:13), that those who practice homosexual activity should be executed as prescribed. Evangelicals do not demand the death penalty for the Jeane Dixons of this world (Lev. 20:27) nor do we "cut off" from among the people, as is demanded by this same Code, those who have intercourse with women during menstruation (Lev. 20:18) and those who marry women who have been divorced (Lev. 21:14). Evangelicals do not keep out of the pulpit those who are visually handicapped or lame or those "with a limb too long" (Lev. 21:18ff).¹²

These statements expose a great ignorance of how the Law fits into the total scheme of the Scriptures. When taken to their logical conclusion these assertions make it possible to say that having sex with animals or engaging in incest is okay for today simply because homosexuality is sandwiched between these two prohibitions. These writers pay a great price in trying to justify their position. It would have been easier for them to say that Christ brought an end to the entire Law (Rom. 10:4). The Ten Commandments are also included in this termination (2 Cor. 3:7-11). Christ is now the Christian's High Priest, which shows

that a radical change in the Law has come about (Heb. 7:11). The Law has been superseded (Heb. 7:11).

When the statement is made that the Law had ended, this does not mean that God no longer has any laws or codes for His people. This does not mean that there are no moral precepts to be followed. The New Testament speaks of the "law of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:2), the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2), and the "royal law" (James 2:8). This "law" includes numerous commands, both positive and negative, which form a distinct code of ethics for today.¹³ It is here that the prohomosexual exegetes have made their mistake. As a unit the New Testament code is new, but not all the commands in the New Testament are new. There is overlap, deletion, and addition. Some of the commands in the Mosaic code have been reincorporated into the New Testament code.

But if the Law was done away, how can parts of it be repeated in the New Testament? The answer lies in the distinction between the Old Testament code and the commandments which were contained in that code.

The Mosaic law has been done away in its entirety as a code. God is no longer guiding the life of man by this particular code. In its place He has introduced the law of Christ. Many of the individual commands within that law are new, but some are not. Some of the ones which are old were also found in the Mosaic law and they are now incorporated completely and [are] forever done away. As part of the law of Christ they are binding on the believer today.¹⁴

This throws much light on the statements made by those who would justify homosexuality from a biblical standpoint. It serves to bring their emotional rhetoric into proper focus. The laws concerning diet, punishment by stoning, or wearing mixed fabrics have been abrogated. However, the proscriptions against homosexual behavior have been repeated in the New Testament code (Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:9-10). This should be a major concern of prohomosexual advocates simply because it totally destroys the point they attempt to make with regard to the Old Testament law. It is false to say that something which was sin under the Law is no longer sin under grace.

What this all means is that the commands dealing with homosexuality in Leviticus 18:23 and 20:13 are still highly relevant because they have been reincorporated into the New Testament code. A moral unity exists between the Old and New Testaments. It has always been wrong to murder, rape, steal, to have sexual relations with animals, and to have sexual relations with

persons of the same sex. God has dealt with people in different ways at different times, but His standard for righteousness has never changed. If morality has changed then the character of God has changed, because the basis of morality is in the character of God who is immutable (Mal. 3:6).

Notes

- 1 D. Sherwin Bailey. *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.. 1955: reprint, Hamden, CT: Shoestring Press, 1975).
- 2 John Boswell., *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- 3 Bailey, *Homosexuality*. p. 5.
- 4 Ibid., p. 4.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 3-5.
- 6 Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1963), p. 137.
- 7 Richard Wolff, *A Commentary on the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 75.
- 8 Josephus, quoted in Wolff, *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
- 9 Boswell. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. p. 95.
- 10 Ralph Blair, *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), p. 3.
- 11 Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 60-61.
- 12 Blair. *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality*, p. 3.
- 13 Charles C. Ryrie, *The Grace of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), pp. 105-13.
- 14 Charles C. Ryrie, "The End of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (July-September 1967):246.

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 3909 Swiss Ave.
 Dallas, TX 75204
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu