

## Exegesis of Biblical Passages Allegedly Concerning Homosexuality

[This is an as yet incomplete draft paper done by the Rev. William Patrick of Jackson, Mississippi. Where there is a blank, followed parenthetically by a Hebrew word transliterated into the Latin alphabet, the blanks were intended to be filled in by the word in the Hebrew "*alephbet*". I can't personally vouch for the biblical scholarship, but it generally fits my other reading. - Jim Burt (a listserv participant)]

The Hebrew and Greek words with the Strong's number system have been added along with some of the Romanized spellings as they appear in cases where they could be reconstructed:

This study is NOT intended as a position paper on homosexuality. It is most especially not intended as an *apologia* for such conduct. It is intended to be just what it claims to be: a biblical exegesis of that group of verses singled out by believers and so often misused by them to bash those whose beliefs differ from and/or contradict their own. We need very desperately to understand what the biblical teachings on this subject actually do say. Or perhaps more appropriately, what they DO NOT portend in spite of the inherent beliefs that have been brought about within our selves because of misunderstandings. A basic premise of this study is that, no matter how open we consider ourselves in our thinking, no hypothesis is brought to a natural conclusion apart from our education, cultural background, environment and pre-determined beliefs and biases. In other words, it is impossible for us to conceive a totally pure thought apart from the aforementioned elements that, of necessity, have a bearing on every aspect of our lives.

There are eight passages in the Bible that have most commonly been cited in direct condemnation of homosexual activity. Some others are related to or comment on these. It should be noted that the sexist bias with which the authors, editors, redactors and translators colored their writings and with which the editors prejudiced their choices of word translations is apparent in the fact that only one of these passages may refer to homosexual activity, and that, more especially among women. [Remember, in approaching interpretation, that specific occurrences of sexism usually apply only in understanding the application of a passage for its original readers. In understanding the universal application of a passage, we may justly acknowledge our fuller understanding of the value of every human being under God. We can then come nearer to making a holistic approach to God's inclusive universal Word before we come to the point of drawing a specific contemporary application.]

### **I. De 23.17-18 (Related passages: 1 K 14.22-24; 15.22; 2K 23.7.)**

[Much of the traditional application of this passage to homosexual activity is based upon a mistranslation in the AV.]

"There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel. Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow, for even both of these are abomination to the Lord thy God."

Far more reliable are the renderings found in most modern translations:

"No Israelite woman shall become a temple-prostitute and no Israelite man shall prostitute himself in this way. You shall not allow a common prostitute's fee, or the pay of a male prostitute, to be brought into the house of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both of them are abominable to the Lord your God." (NEB)

The central word at issue in this passage is [*Qadesh* – H6947] קִדְּשׁ בְּרִינָה, בְּרִינָה (*qadesh*), the masculine form, and the feminine form of the same word, [Q'*deshah* – H6948] קִדְּשָׁה (*qedeshah*). While "whore" is simply an inaccurate translation of the feminine form, the translation "sodomite" is wholly unjustified and may be ascribed to a bias in translation without attention to the actual meaning. This may well be a case in which the translators lacked sufficient understanding of historicity, and even *hielgescheit*, to comprehend the background and intended meaning of these words. (The word "sodomite" itself was coined into usage in the English language based on the misinterpretation of the story of Sodom, which will be discussed next. "Sodomytis" was first used by Wyclif in Wks. 55, c.1380. "Sodomits" is found in his Apol. Loll. 55, c.1400. Caxton next picks it up in Dictes Ilb in 1477 using the term "sodomytes.") Since both the masculine and feminine forms are of the same root, both should be translated "temple" or "cultic prostitute." The cultures that surrounded the Israelites included fertility cults. It was believed by these cults the gods could be encouraged to make the earth and its inhabitants fertile through engaging in sexual intercourse with sacred prostitutes in the temples.

It must be remembered that the Hebrew peoples had just left Egypt where gods were the order of the day. There was a god in, of and/or for everything. There are extant, at present, names for over 2000 of these gods with many, many more still unnamed, but each with a specific purpose. Israel was aware that Yahweh was their special "tribal" God, but remained unconvinced of monotheism until the period of the Babylonian captivity some 700 plus years after the Exodus. Hence, "Yahweh could bring us out of Egypt, but now that we are in Canaan maybe we need to appease the local gods of the land (fertility, etc.) so that we may have good crops." The Israelites lived in constant temptation to adopt the religious practices of their neighbors and the focus of this passage is that they are to be set apart with a new understanding of one God who deals with them personally.

Objectionable as prostitution may have been, in and of itself, the issue here was the fact that they were not to relate to God in terms of magic and idolatrous rites. The condemnation applied equally to female and male prostitutes--regardless of sexual partners. In fact, there is no direct reference here to homosexual activity. Some archaeologists and historians believe that male temple prostitutes may have served male worshippers. Others believe they served women. I, myself, deem it unlikely that these prostitutes were engaged in homosexual activity since that would seem pointless in a fertility cult. Whichever scholars you find persuasive, the fact remains that the condemnation of this passage is directed at prostitution--specifically ritual or cultic prostitution, at that--regardless of whether it was heterosexual or homosexual in intent.

**II. Genesis 19.4-11; Judges 19.22. (Related passages -- Jude 6-7 and 2 Peter 2. 4, 6-8.) Genesis 19.5, the focus of the issue here, is translated:**

"And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who come to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them." (RSV)

The related passage in the story of the men of Gibeah in Judges reads:

"Now as they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, saying bring forth the man that come into thine house, that we may know him." (AV)

The traditional interpretation of the Genesis account of Lot and the destruction of Sodom is that God's reason for destruction of the city was the depravity of the people, particularly expressed here in homosexual behavior. (The passage in Judges is similar.) One major point of controversy in this verse is the word [*Yada* – H3045] יָדַע, יָדָה (*yadha*), which literally means "to know, or to experience fully". A word study reveals the following concerning the use of *yadah*: The word occurs, outside of these two passages, 943 times in the OT and in only 10 of those occurrences does it specifically denote sexual intercourse. The term occurs in five additional instances combined with the word [*Mishkab* – H4903 & 04] מִשְׁכָּב (*mishkabh*) to mean simply the act of lying down. By comparison, the word [*Shakab* – H7901] שָׁכַב (*shakhabh*), which is the root of *mishkabh* occurs fifty times to mean "lie with" in a sexual sense. Moreover, in its sexual applications *yadha* always means heterosexual intercourse. *Shakhabh* is used of both homosexual and bestial intercourse, in addition to that of heterosexual.

Some interpreters hold that if the writers had intended the meaning to be homosexual intercourse, they would have used a form of *shakhabh* and not *yadha*. By this evidence, and by the simple statistical incidence, the traditional interpretation of *yadha* as sexual is open to question. On the other side of the debate, however, falls the observation that *yadha* here means "to be acquainted with" is not off the mark. While its customary meaning is "to know" things, it means an intimate, close and complete knowledge in all of its aspects - hence the sexual interpretation when applied to persons. It is not simply used as a euphemism for sexual activity as some seem to think. There are interpreters who feel if the men of the city were simply demanding the presence of the visitors to "get acquainted" with them (and perhaps to assault them physically), then Lot's offer of his virgin daughters was unmotivated. These, for the most part, are convinced that Lot's offer was meant as a substitute for the other sexual activity. The same argument is applied to the word's occurrence in the verse in Judges.

Place this in the context of life in that time and place. Lot had given the hospitality of his home to two strangers to the city. Unknown strangers were suspect in the walled cities of the day. They could have been spies or saboteurs. Lot, himself, was a "resident alien" in Sodom and had taken in two unknown guests. The men of the city could well have been suspicious and angry. They could have been planning an assault on the guests simply because they were foreigners. This sort of "inhospitality" was a heinous crime even in that day. Lot was aware of the divine nature of his guests and was so concerned and frightened by the consequences such treatment would bring that, in casting about for any alternative, the first thing he settled on was the offer of his virgin daughters--presumably to take the men's minds off his visitors. Remember, too, the sexist bias of the culture. Lot's daughters were chattel – his property. Their value as

chattel, to offer in marriage especially, was enhanced by their virginity. He was, in effect, offering the men of the city a valuable bribe, perhaps, in his view, the most highly cherished of his possessions. In view of this cultural background one could assume that emotions were running high and there was a very real and present danger involved--at least from Lot's point of view. This, certainly, quite apart from any homosexual intent.

There are, then, two strong sides of the controversy over the translation of the word *yadha*. It is interesting that modern translators have seen fit to go further than simply here translating it "to know." Hence, we have a variance in latitude in the interpretation of the Genesis verse: "have intercourse with" (NEB); "abuse" (JB); "rape" (Moffatt). While this issue is important in deciding whether or not there is a connotation of homosexuality in these passages, this is not really the central issue. Whether or not the incident was homosexual; whether or not it was to involve abuse and injury; the reasons for the destruction of Sodom were far larger and more longstanding. A clearer definition of the sin of Sodom is found in Ezekiel 16.46ff:

"This was your sibling Sodom's crime: Sodom and its children lived in pride, in plenty, in careless ease; she never lent a hand to the weak and wretched. Haughty they grew, and they committed detestable impieties before my face. So I swept them off, when I noticed it." (Moffatt)

Note the translation "detestable impieties". This is much closer to the true meaning of the word than the "abominations" of the AV. This word occurred in the passage studied in Deuteronomy, as well. We shall examine it when we consider the verses in Leviticus. According to the writer of Ezekiel, then, Sodom's sin was not primarily sexual. In the general scope of the overall sinfulness, sexual sins could undoubtedly have been part of the transgression. Whether you feel that *yadha* here is sexual in meaning or not, the attitude of the men, their evident intent to abuse, was simply characteristic of the evil of the city which had already decided its destruction.

Another point to consider is that lists of things in scriptures are usually enumerated in order of importance from beginning to end. It is interesting that "abominations", the sin for which Sodom is remembered today, whether or not it refers to homosexuality appears last on the list. A useful comparison to the indictment in Ezekiel for this sin of "inhospitality" may be found in Jesus words on similar cases such as Luke 10.10-12 and 16.19ff:

"But whenever you come to a town and they will not receive you, go out into the street and say, "The very dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off as a protest. Only be sure of this--the Real of God is close at hand". I tell you that it will be more enduring for Sodom on that Great Day than for that town." (Weymouth)

Note, too, that in the only other passages that comment on Sodom, 2 Peter does not refer to a sexual transgression at all and Jude does not define it as homosexual. It was not until the first century, A.D. that the interpretation of Sodom's sin as homosexuality began to emerge in writings.

This is some two millennia after the occurrence and is first to be found in the works of Philo and Josephus. This interpretation did not occur at all in any of the writings of

Jewish religious scholars. The early church based its anti-homosexuality attitudes and interpretations upon acceptance of writings such as those of these two nonreligious scholars (?). Church historians are beginning to learn that homosexuality was not universally condemned nor a settled issue during the first few centuries of the Church. Some Church Fathers were not opposed to it and a few were even involved in it to some degree. By looking at the passages in Genesis and Judges, we can see that, even if the proposed activity was to be sexual, the sin in that moment lay in the intent to violate, to abuse rather than in the choice of object.

### III. LEVITICUS 18.22, 20.13-14:

"You shall not lie with a man as with a woman: that is an abomination."  
(NEB)

" If a man has intercourse with a man as with a woman, they both commit an abomination. They shall be put to death; their blood shall be on their own heads." (AV)

These verses occur in the portion of Leviticus that is known as the "Holiness Code." These were laws specifically addressed to the Hebrew people who were surrounded by pagan and polytheistic peoples. Their uniqueness in worship was constantly in danger of contamination. They were commanded to be holy--that is, set apart to God. This code of laws was to keep them visibly set apart as a reminder to them and a witness to others. It was mandated to keep them separate and maintain their cultic purity.

The word [*Towebah, Toebah* – H8441] תּוֹעֵבָה (*toebhah*) that occurs in these passages is most frequently translated "abomination." In English, "abomination" connotes general distaste and disgust, filthiness. The Hebrew word from which it comes, however, has a specific relationship to idolatry. Moffatt's translation of the word quoted earlier is a good one: "detestable impieties." This translation focuses attention on the fact that the problem here is a religious one, a violation of God's sovereignty. It is applied to practices throughout the OT that were characteristic of idolatry. It refers to any idolatrous practice, not only to sexual ones. The reason cited for the wrong doing associated with these acts, then, was that they were idolatrous. (i.e., I Sam. 15.23: For rebellion is as the sin of divination and stubbornness is an iniquity and idolatry. (RSV) Leviticus 19.26 and Deuteronomy 18.10ff. both speak to these "abominations" as well and the sin of witchcraft all of which are to result in the death of those practicing such. As noted in Ezekiel 16.46ff, God is uttering a diatribe against the house of Israel and comparing their sins to those of Sodom; where the sins of Sodom are listed--biblical listings are usually in order of importance--the word says, "...she and her daughters had (1) pride, (2) surfeit of food, (3) prosperous ease, (4) did not aid the poor and needy, (5) haughty, (6) committed abominable things--note: (a) things is plural, more than one, and (b) abominable is not necessarily equated with homosexuality--before me. (RSV).

Once again, our knowledge of the culture and history of the time will explain why this was true. In the context of Israelite patriarchal society, anal intercourse between men was regarded with suspicion. The man who was the recipient was viewed as submissive, even passive, very much in accord with the common modern sexist stereotype. It was even customary in some surrounding cultures to consummate the humiliation and defeat of an enemy, especially one who was to become a slave, by

subjecting him to anal penetration. This was to emphasize the fact that he was property, of status no better than a woman. This similarity to the role of a woman is the key, for once again we are confronted with the sexist cultural reality that women were chattel and that one of their roles as such was to be the recipient of sexual intercourse. Israelites believed the male sex to have absolute dignity, inviolable dignity, because males were created in the image of God. To treat a male like a woman, then, was to violate the image of God and this was idolatrous. This casts a new light on the phrase, "lie with a man as with a woman," or, "has intercourse with a man as with a woman."

#### IV. 1 Corinthians 6.9, 1 Timothy 1.9-10

The central issue here is translation of specific words.

"You know perfectly well that people who do wrong will not inherit the kingdom of God: people of immoral lives, idolaters, adulterers, catamites, sodomites . . ." (JB)

"He must keep in mind that no law is ever made for honest people but for the lawless and the insubordinate, for the impious and the sinful, for the irreverent and the profane, for parricides and matricides, murderers, immoral persons, sodomites . . ." (Moffatt)

The words at issue are *malakoi* (ma-la-kee) [*Malakia* – G3119] **μαλακία**, translated "catamites" above, and *arsenokoitai* (ar-sen-o-kee-teh) [*Arsenokoites* – G733] **ἀρσενοκοίτης**, translated "sodomites" by Moffatt. *Malakos* comes from a root word (ma-la-kohs) [*Malakos* – G3120] **μαλακός**, which literally means "soft" (as in clothing) or even "effeminate". Note that effeminacy to the Greeks did not equal homosexuality. The context of "effeminate", however, in the absence of adequate word study led some translators to the unsupported conclusion that the word meant "catamites", even a sort of temple prostitution. However, the word was used in contemporary literature to mean moral weakness, sometimes even cowardice. It was an adjective which Paul used here as a noun. The fact that he speaks of people who do wrong (the present imperfect tense here used means people who are now doing wrong and will continue to do wrong -- a habitual practice) indicates a particular reference. So, the combination of evidence indicates a translation of "the morally weak" or, as Moffatt has translated it, "immoral persons".

The second word, *arsenokoitai* (*arsenokoitai*) , appears in both passages. Once again, an adjective becomes a noun characterizing a person by a habitual behavior. Forms of the word in writings fairly contemporary with this one indicate that it does probably refer to a form of temple prostitution, a practice which persisted in some cultures. In later centuries the word began to apply more broadly to excessive, perhaps abusive sexual practices. Even in its appearance as a noun in the 6th century Penitential of Johannes Jejunator, Patriarch of Constantinople, it is clear that the word applies to both heterosexual and homosexual activity. Therefore, it is certainly not a specific reference to homosexual activity in this early usage and the translation "sodomite" is without merit. The word might better be translated "temple prostitute".

Neither of these words applies to homosexual persons, or specifically to homosexual activity. One refers to a form of prostitution and the other probably to consistent moral

weakness, of whatever sort. The use of the adjective "homosexual" as a noun, as happens in English, is unjustified in the translation of Greek. Greek had no word equivalent to the use of "homosexual" as a noun. There were a number of Greek words for people who engaged in certain homosexual practices. Had the writers meant to indicate homosexual activity, there were certainly words they could have used. The two words in question do not even approach such meanings. They occur in lists of crime and abuse of other persons.

The teaching of Scripture here as in Leviticus, is a reminder that Christians are to relate to others in love and not to use others as objects. Persons who consistently and habitually objectify others, as Paul points out, cannot be in God's realm since they obviously do not understand God's love. It is interesting, then, to look at the ways various translators have rendered these words, reflecting their biases. Note, especially, the translations which have chosen to ignore that fact that there are two quite different words at issue in the 1 Corinthian passage. They have combined them without comment under one erroneous designation. The words in 1 Corinthians are translated:

"Nor effeminate, nor homosexuals" (ASV)  
"Men guilty of unnatural crime" (Weymouth)  
"nor homosexuals" (RSV)  
"or of homosexual perversion" (NEB)  
"Nor catamites nor sodomites" (Moffatt)

The word in 1 Timothy is translated:

"sodomites" (Weymouth)  
"homosexuals" (ASV)  
"immoral ... with boys or with men" (JB)  
"perverts" (NEB)  
"sodomites" (RSV)

#### **V. Romans 1:26-27**

"That is why God has abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have turned from natural intercourse to unnatural practices and why their men folk have given up natural intercourse to be consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameless things with men and getting an appropriate reward for their perversion." (JB)

We would be remiss should we not point out at this juncture that verses must be interpreted within the overall context of a particular pericope or within the total scope of a specific author. These verses occur in the midst of a discussion of idolatry. "That is why" refers to the fact that they have been putting other things before God, in this case their sexual desires—more often than not, associated with their idolatrous religions.

The first important issue that arises in the passage centers on whether vs. 26 speaks of homosexuality among women. The Gk word *methlaxan* (meh-teel-lax-ahn) [*Metallasso* – G3337] μεταλλάσσω, translated "turned from" or "changed", only says that the women altered former practices. It does NOT specify what their new practices were. It does NOT specify that they were homosexual ones. The reason for believing that they were

comes from the first word in vs. 27. In Gk the word *omoios* [*Homoios* – G3668] ὁμοίως, translated in the Jerusalem Bible as "and" is more accurately translated "likewise" or "in the same way". It has the grammatical effect of an equals sign. Since the practices of the men Paul mentions in vs. 27 are clearly homosexual, the word *omoios* indicates that the practices in vs. 26 are, as well. If we accept this reasoning from grammar, vs. 26 is the only reference in scripture to homosexual activity among women.

In speaking of homosexual practices, Paul uses the word *parafusin* (pa-ra-fee-seen) [Para: 'against' – [G3844] παρά + Physis: 'nature' – G5449] φύσις. JB translates it "unnatural" but a more literal rendering is "against nature". This word is not to be confused with the L. *contra naturam* (against nature), which is traditionally ascribed by theologians for such descriptions. This argument is based on *bios* (or more properly, human physiology) rather than Jewish religious tradition. When *parafusin* is used by Paul he is speaking in the latter vein. Anything that was contrary to Jewish religious imperatives was, in Paul's consideration, "against nature".

This characterization, then, corresponds to the Hebrew word \_\_\_\_\_, referred to above. Paul sees a violation of the law and traditions contra idolatry--the primary topic of concern is this pericope. To rephrase, Paul, thus, considers these lustful sexual practices to be idolatrous, rather than biologically unnatural.

The use of the word *afentes* (a-fen-des) [*Aphiemi, Enaphiemi* – 'leaving' – G863] ἀφίημι, ἐναφίημι, of the action of the men in vs. 27. The word is *clated* "given up" or "left to" or "abandoned". Some interpreters feel that the use of this word appertains to those who leave heterosexual behavior that is "natural" to them for homosexual behavior that is not. They maintain that for some people homosexual behavior is already the "natural" course and this verse is not applicable to such people.

This interpretation fails to allow for the variety of human experience. Like Paul himself, it assumes that all humans are sexually polarized. Kinsey Institute (1994 report) reflects a spread all across the spectrum which would seem to contrast with empirical findings that are available today – which have to be weighed and resolved with this interpretation of *afentes* in reference to people who are primarily homosexual. With this interpretation there is no room for bisexuality that is known throughout all cultures in the world today. Other interpreters emphasize an earlier point. There is no Greek word or concept equivalent to homosexuality used as a noun to describe one whose lifestyle was such. In Greek writings people engaged in homosexual activity but were not characterized as such.

Paul, being an educated Roman as well as a Jew, was not accustomed to thinking of a person as a "homosexual" but rather more likely, that engaging in homosexual activity was the leaving behind of the heterosexual. His personal and cultural bias would have included the Jewish view of the absolute dignity of the male. He would have believed--in line with scriptural teachings--that a man was incomplete without a wife. As a good Pharisee, he was, at some point, probably married and we have no idea what happened to his wife. At the time of his writings, he was celibate and counseled others also so to do. He obviously did not believe that homosexual activity could be held in the same context as a love relationship between a man and a woman. He uses the word *orexis* (o-rex-es) [*Orexis* – G3715] ὄρεξις, that may be clated "desire", "lust" or "passion", in



referring to homosexual activity. He believed that such behavior could only be self-centered, using the other as an object, and in the process refusing to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

As Paul explains, the results of putting self or things before our commitment to God is disastrous. When we so abandon ourselves to desire and selfishness we are certainly not acknowledging God as a part of that relationship. The same may also be said of illicit heterosexual relationships as well. Indeed, there is no difference in the sight of God. Marriage was divinely designed as a relationship between one man and one woman who through the process of totally "knowing" or "experiencing" each other become one flesh. Anything else is a misuse of that which was provided for us by our Maker. Who also happens to love us enough to allow us to go our own way and do our own thing until we have finally had enough and make the effort to return to our relationship with him. We have freedom of choice--even to the extent of self-destruction. As Paul states, if we insist on giving ourselves up to our lust, God will allow us to do so and will not abridge our freedom to reject Him.

Biological aspects of homosexuality are also a reality, with genetic, intrauterine, neurohormonal research gradually unfolding more insight, although current findings about nature vs. nurture continue to rage. Some maintain that God did not make us that way, but from a biblical standpoint, it would seem that lust, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is the end result of sin and the existence of evil in this world. Here, too, he has provided a way out, but we have to desire it and seek it out. In ministering, we should remember that sin is sin is sin. Homosexuality is no different in the sight of God than illicit heterosexuality or, for that matter, the overindulgence (lust, if you will) of food, drink or anything else that becomes an idol by coming between you and the One who made you in his image and likeness and that One whose temple these earthly abodes of our spirit are said to be. Perhaps if those whose attitudes are blatantly homophobic could develop a like attitude towards all heterosexuality outside the marriage relationship in a sort of matching Hetero-phobic concept we could possibly be in a better place to minister to all who come to us in need.