



# The Bible and Sexuality

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16 October 2006<sup>1</sup>

## The Context of the Debate

The eighth chapter of Acts recounts the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is reading the scriptures and Philip explains that they point to the good news about Jesus. They pass by some water, and in verse 36 the eunuch asks, "What is to prevent me being baptised?" And then Philip baptises him. This is a tremendous story of inclusion; the Ethiopian is the outsider *par excellence*; he is a foreigner, he is a Gentile, and if these marks of his being outside the family of God were not enough, he is a eunuch; he is a sexual outsider. And yet, these barriers are overcome and he becomes an insider, a sharer in the good news of Jesus.

An ancient scribe obviously found it hard to accept such unconditional acceptance, and inserted what is now verse 37 (this verse is usually in the margin of modern translations). Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And the eunuch said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

What made the later scribe add these verses? Although they are historically plausible, it seems the scribe was a bit nervous about such radical inclusion of this outsider, without laying down some pretty tight conditions; conditions which are not explicit in the original text. Outsiders may become insiders, but only if they follow the rules.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper based on a lecture given to the organisation 'Zero28' in Belfast ([www.zero28.org](http://www.zero28.org)).

Any mention of homosexuality in religious circles is guaranteed to provoke a reaction. There may be embarrassed silence, an abrupt change of subject, or angry combative opposition. The subject of homosexuality within the Church, or even homosexuality in general, has become the “scare issue” for Christian community.

Most publicly, the Anglican Church is tearing itself apart over the issue; it is, as journalist Stephen Bates in the title of his recent book on this topic puts it, “A Church at War.”<sup>2</sup> Bates points to an important triad of events: the elevation of Rowan Williams to the Archbishopric of Canterbury; the abortive attempt to consecrate Jeffery John, a celibate gay man, as Bishop of Reading, and the successful democratic election of Gene Robinson, a divorced priest in a stable same-sex relationship, as Bishop of New Hampshire. These three events, Bates argues, brought to head tensions which had been bubbling away for some time, since the Lambeth conference in 1998.

That conference, which Bates claims was hijacked by a coalition of evangelicals and fundamentalists, intent on carrying out a “Talibanisation” of the Church, passed a resolution declaring homosexual acts (the term wasn’t defined: and this I think is an important question) to be incompatible with scripture. There was, of course, some dissent from this line, with the Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, for instance famously declaring the coalition of right-wing American Bishops and those from the Global south, to be “miserable buggers.” A female bishop from New Zealand had rather more choice words, which I won’t repeat here, but she dissented.

The Anglican Church now seems to be on the verge of a split. When Rowan Williams backed down over Jeffery John, some in the evangelical wing of the Church scented blood. Jeffrey John, of course, was celibate, and therefore should not have posed any problem to evangelicals who often say that they have no problem with gay priests so long as they are celibate. So, there does seem to be an aversion to homosexuality *per se* on the part of evangelicals, at odds with their words. I believe they claimed the issue was that he had not renounced his past behaviour, but again, that is not really very convincing; he would simply have been one of a number of liberal bishops who disagree with evangelicals on that issue.

The Jeffrey John incident was of course as nothing compared to the consecration of Gene Robinson; tensions rose to such a pitch that the Presiding Bishop actually felt the need to wear a bullet-proof vest under his robes. As an aside, that fact, were I a conservative evangelical, would concern me. I might wonder, what is it that makes those with whom we disagree fear for their safety, and even their lives?

The Anglican Church now seems to be heading to an inevitable split. The fact that the fault lines are largely geographical should also arouse suspicion. What is it about the developed world that makes it more tolerant of not just gay priests but also women priests, and even bishops? And what is it about the developing world that makes them hostile to such things?

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<sup>2</sup> Bates, Stephen, A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2004).

The Anglican Church is not the only church facing problems over the issue of homosexuality. The Presbyterian Church USA for years batted back and forward between General Assembly and Presbyteries resolutions and counter-resolutions about the wording of an ordination standard that would effectively rule out ministers in same-sex relationships. They've come to an uneasy truce where it is up to each Presbytery to decide how to enforce the ordination standard.

I anticipate that this is how the Church of Scotland will resolve the various issues surrounding same-sex relationships. In 1993, the General Assembly refused to adopt a resolution that would have banned ministers from carrying out blessings of gay relationships. Last year, the Assembly voted for legislation to protect ministers who carry out blessings of civil partnerships from facing disciplinary action. This legislation has gone down to presbyteries under the barrier act, where each presbytery can vote yes or no, potentially blocking the legislation (a kind of ecclesiastical rhythm method). I suspect this legislation will not get through the presbyteries, and so the position will remain unchanged; namely that the Church of Scotland does not bar ministers from carrying out blessings of same-sex partnerships, but does not guarantee freedom from disciplinary action.<sup>3</sup> A report on sexuality is coming to the 2007 General Assembly, and we wait to see what will be in the report.

## Orthodoxy and Same-sex Relationships

While some churches now do have openly gay ministers, for the majority of the world's Christian communities, the issues surrounding homosexual people have become the touchstone for orthodoxy. And this is strange: for we must ask the question: are our attitudes to same-sex relationships really a *doctrinal* issue? Does it really alter what we believe about God, about the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the activity of the Holy Spirit? I really, genuinely don't see how it does. At the moment, for churches, while it is safe to disagree about many issues (infant vs believers baptism, for example), it simply does not appear to be safe to disagree about the acceptability of differing sexual tastes among consenting adults. Why has the church become so hung up about sex?

Many Christians believe that the issue is not so much one about homosexuality *per se*; rather it is an argument about the Bible. Christians are concerned that the credibility, the importance, the very authority of the Bible is at stake. And that is why it is so important. It's not obvious to me that this is in fact the case. Peter Gomes in his book, *The Good Book*, shows how, in fact, readings of the Bible have changed in relation to race, to anti-Semitism, and the treatment of women.<sup>4</sup> His chapter on the Bible and Homosexuality is subtitled, "The Church's Last Prejudice." I think that is perhaps a touch over-optimistic. Once the church has dealt with homosexuality, it will have to deal with trans-gendered, and particularly post-operative individuals, though I am concerned that few, if any of us will have the energy.

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's note (21 December 2006): The result of the presbytery vote was 9 in favour of the new Declaratory Act, with 36 against. The actual vote count was 1007 in favour, 1563 against.

<sup>4</sup> Gomes, Peter J, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, (Perennial, New Edition, 1999).

What I intend to do for the rest of this paper is to look at the Bible in relation to homosexuality. I'll have a look at all the usual texts, what feminist scholar Phyllis Trible<sup>5</sup> might call "Texts of Terror", and show how it is relatively easy to understand these texts in a way which makes them less applicable to committed homosexual relationships. I am not going to use trickery or sleight of hand; I am not really going to say anything new. Indeed, I think I could have said everything I am going to say ten years ago. And this in itself is an issue - one of Stephen Bates' most provocative conclusions is that the Church has never been so dislocated from the prevailing views of society.

Many Christians today might applaud this, while many may dispute it, saying that Christianity has always been counter-cultural. I myself, who have written on martyrdom in the early church, would point to the first century church as standing in opposition to the Imperial Cult. However, I would also have to concede that, contrary to what you might think, the morality espoused by Paul was not that dissimilar to educated Graeco-Roman moral thinking. We are all brought up in Sunday School to think that the Greeks and Romans were sexually-debauched perverts. On the whole, however, they were not.

When you take Peter Gomes' observation on some of the darker consequences of reading the Bible - slave ownership, anti-Semitism, and the poor treatment of women - I wonder whether it was really the Bible that created those conditions, or whether in fact, this is where society was for other reasons, and the Bible was simply used as justification for that situation, but only when others began to challenge those practises.

A while ago, I had a quick look at some material from the UK Evangelical Alliance which I had filed away. What is interesting is that when they spoke about homosexuality in the early 1990s, they didn't spend that much time on the biblical texts; they simply used arguments that were current in society. It is only when those social arguments no longer existed, more emphasis was placed on the Bible. And there are now no convincing social arguments against same-sex relationships; all that is left are arguments from the Bible, and it is those arguments that I want to look at.

## The Bible

Before we look specifically at what the Bible has to say about the Bible and homosexuality, or indeed the Bible and anything, we're probably served best by first looking at the Bible itself.

The Bible is a collection of writings, written over a period of at least 900 years (from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), which have been collected, edited, revised, and finally canonised in the fourth century. The Bible is made up of works of poetry, song, prophetic critique, laws, philosophical writings, stories from the royal court, theological history, gospels, apocalyptic literature, and letters. Together they comprise one of the most stunning literary achievements in

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<sup>5</sup> Trible, Phyllis, Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives, (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1984).

the ancient world, and to my mind, the Authorised Version or King James Bible of 1611 is one of the greatest works of English literature.

But what do we expect to get from the Bible when we read it? The books of the Bible were written in many different ages and historical situations. The “historical” books of the Bible were written hundreds of years after the events they recall, and usually say something important to the historical situation of the readers. Reading the Exodus story, where God led the people out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, has particular currency when a people are in exile hoping to return home. The book of Daniel, set in the 6<sup>th</sup> century exile, with the resistance to the pressure to give up the marks of Judaism, had particular resonances with the crisis under Antiochus Euphianes in the second century BC, when most scholars think Daniel was written. King Antiochus outlawed circumcision, forced the people to eat pork, and executed those who resisted. The stories of Daniel and his friends became models of resistance for the Jews living under a tyrant king (as in Daniel).

Similarly, the letters of Paul are situational; written to specific people at a particular time to deal with particular problems. Paul never intended his letters to be read two thousand years after he wrote them, and given his expectations for the nearness of the end of the age, he’d probably have been horrified by the prospect. The Gospels, although telling the story of Jesus in the 30s AD, reflect each gospel writer’s particular theological concerns, and something of their historical situation. Therefore, the books of the Bible are historical documents as well as being scripture for Christians and Jews; we always need to keep something of their historical context in mind when we come to interpret them.

## Reading Communities

As well as the books of the Bible being written in particular times and contexts, so all readers of the Bible read from a particular place, time, and context. That place, time, and context, not only influences the reading of the Bible, but also, and crucially determines the possible range of meanings of a biblical (or indeed any) text. You often hear people talking about the “plain meaning” of a biblical text, but if the biblical text was so clear, why was it that perfectly good Christians thought the Bible justified the ownership of slaves? We now think they were wrong, but were we 18<sup>th</sup> century slave-owning Christians, would we read the bible and conclude that slave owning was sinful? I doubt it. Context, time, and place determine the possible ranges of Biblical interpretation. Note, that’s not the same thing as saying context dictates the interpretation. However, it does determine the range within which interpretations are possible.

So too does a reading community. Particular communities determine, usually subconsciously, what readings are valid and invalid. This is different from which readings are contextually possible. If you belong to a church that practises infant baptism, then although your denomination might believe it is possible to read the New Testament in such a way as to rule out the baptism of infants, the community has determined that such an interpretation is not valid within the parameters of that church.

Communities of slaves and communities of slave owners read the same texts. Where the slave owners read justification of keeping slaves and regarded black Africans as inferior, the slaves read the same texts and saw stories of liberation.

When it comes to a biblical story like David and Jonathan, for example, the question of whether David and Jonathan were having what we would call a same-sex relationship is beside the point: there really is no way of knowing. The question is how is that story read and recognised by particular communities. A young gay Christian might recognise himself in the story, and see what others may not see. It does not make the reading any less valid, although it may be regarded as illegitimate by some Christian communities.

That's all a rather long-winded way of saying that our context and our time, our social location are important factors in the way we are inclined to read Biblical texts. I very much doubt that there is a single person reading this whose views on homosexuality, one way or the other, is determined by what the Bible says, or more accurately what you think the Bible says. Some of you might think it is, but it's more likely been determined by a complex series of social contextual factors.

## The Texts

Ok, let's get down to it. The first thing to say is that homosexuality is not a particularly important issue in the Bible. Male-male sexual contact is mentioned just over half a dozen times. Some Christians who oppose gay relationships argue that it is not so much the texts that mention homosexuality, but the consistent promotion of monogamous heterosexual marriage that runs throughout the whole Bible, from creation, right through to the metaphor of marriage in the image of final consummation in the book of Revelation.

I am always astonished when educated readers of the Bible make this claim. For there are many models of heterosexual relationship in the Bible, and monogamous marriage is hardly represented at all. Try to name a normal married couple in the Bible, where God didn't have to intervene in their relationship... I can only come up with Annanias and Saphira... and look what happened to them.<sup>6</sup> The Bible accepts polygamy, marrying your brother's wife, incest, the list of biblical practices, which we would find unacceptable, is rather long. Indeed, if this paper was about the Bible and Heterosexuality, it might have been rather more interesting.

The argument "God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve" is an incredibly weak one (if one can call a slogan an argument). What is going on in the Eden story? It is a story of how humanity came to be. Since it is necessary for a man and a woman to produce a baby, there had to be a first man and a first woman. But according to early Christian tradition, procreation was not initially intended for Adam and Eve; the need to procreate was a result of the fall, and according to

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<sup>6</sup> See Acts 5: 1-11. After a property deal Ananias was confronted by Peter for having misled the apostles about the money they had raised. Ananias dropped dead. When Sapphira came in and was also confronted, she too dropped dead.

Genesis 3, heterosexual desire for her man comes at considerable expense: pain in childbirth and subjugation to him. Heterosexual desire for woman could therefore be seen as the curse of the Fall.

Even if one regards the creation account (and you have to choose between the two accounts of Genesis 1, where man is created last, or Genesis 2, where man is created first) as historical (getting round the fact that the first man is given the Hebrew word for man - Adam), or accept them as aetiological myths, a theological "just-so" story (explaining what is the case), the fact that it occurs singularly, at the beginning of creation, in no way suggests an essentialist ethic which bars homosexual relationships. It no more rules out same-sex relationships than it does celibacy. Indeed, the verse, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) perhaps elevates any relationship over singleness - but I wouldn't want to push that one.

We turn now to the passages which seem to rule out homosexual relationships. Of the texts commonly cited, four are in the Old Testament, and four in the New Testament. The four Old Testament passages can be grouped in two pairs.

### **Sodom and Gomorrah: Genesis 19 / Judges 19**

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is perhaps the key biblical text on homosexuality. From the town of Sodom comes the term Sodomite. Two angels come to Sodom and Lot, Abraham's nephew invites them to his house. The men of the city come to the door demanding that Lot hand over the strangers so that they might "know" them (Hebrew word: *yadah*). Lot refuses, but offers his daughters. The men try to break the door down, but they are all struck by blindness. Lot is told the city is to be destroyed and is told to take his family away and not to look back. Lot's wife does so and is turned into a pillar of salt.

Conservative readers of this text say here is clear evidence that homosexuality is condemned, and this was the reason Sodom was destroyed. The latter point is simply wrong. In Genesis 18, God tells Abraham that he is going to destroy four cities, Sodom and Gomorrah among them. This is where Abraham tries to bargain with God, getting him down to accepting if there were ten decent men in the cities, he would not destroy them.

Now some revisionist readers claim that the word *yadah* "to know" did not imply sexual intercourse. The men simply wanted to interrogate them, since the city had recently been at war. I think this is unlikely; the fact that Lot offered his daughter to them, suggests they were concerned with sex. However, it would be a rather strange thing to decide a particular activity is outlawed because of an abuse of it. The men of Sodom wanted to gang rape the angels, in contravention of any hospitality code, and indeed it is a lack of hospitality which is identified as the sin of Sodom in other parts of the Bible (Ezekiel 16:49-50; Matthew 10:14-15; 2 Peter 6-8; Jude 7, which I will come back to).

To judge committed same-sex relationships on the basis of the Sodom and Gomorrah story is like judging heterosexual behaviour on the actions of Jack the

Ripper. Biblical scholar, Krister Stendhal, has written about Gen 19, "It's a folk story. It even has a little black humour, in the fact that [Lot] is so anxious to protect his guests that he's willing to sacrifice his daughters. To make a biblical ethics story out of it is not very wise."

Similarly with a parallel story in Judges 19. A man and his servant come to Gibeah and they are invited into an old man's house. The men of the town all come to the door, again demanding "to know" the stranger. The old man offers his daughter and the man's concubine. When the men of the village refuse, the stranger grabs his concubine and throws her out, where she is gang-raped. In the morning, the man comes downstairs, sees his concubine at the door, and commands her to get up. When she doesn't respond, he puts her on his donkey, takes her home, and then cuts her up into twelve pieces and sends a piece to each of the tribes of Israel. Again, to make judgements about homosexual relationships on this passage is rather off-beam. Neither the men of Sodom nor Gibeah were what we would call gay. In this cultural context, to penetrate another man was to humiliate him, in short, to "turn him into a woman", as Old Testament scholar, Ken Stone, explains:

In the socio-cultural context of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world, sexual penetration symbolizes unequal power relations. Thus the public rape of one man by another constitutes a powerful semiotic mechanism, humiliating the raped man in the eyes of other men by making him a sexual object.<sup>7</sup>

It is not so much the sex in the stories that require interrogating, but the inscribed attitudes to gender. What kind of ethic allows women to be thrown to crowds in the place of men? We have to wrestle with the fact that our Bible contains stories which presuppose a highly sexist attitude, where it is preferable for a woman to be raped than for a man to be shamed. When we look at biblical texts, we don't simply look at the words, but the attitudes which a reader would have to share in order to accept them. The Genesis and Judges stories ask us to accept, firstly that penetration of a man makes him like a woman, and secondly being a woman is so shameful that it is a step in a downward direction for a man.

## Leviticus

This thought prepares the way for the two Leviticus passages 18:22 and 20:13, which state, "A man shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination." Chapter 20 says more or less the same thing, but adds the death penalty.

There are at least four possible approaches to these passages for those who believe that there is a case for rereading apparent injunctions against homosexuality in light of further knowledge.

Firstly, the translation: there are actually many ways of reading the passage. Literally the passage reads "And with a male you shall not lay layings of a woman":

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<sup>7</sup> Stone, Ken, *Practising Safer Texts: Food, Sex, and Bible in Queer Perspective*, (Continuum International Publishing, 2005, pp. 79-80.

It seems clear to me that some form of intercourse between men is prohibited. Some, however, question the scope of that prohibition: is it only intercourse; does it have a particularly cultic setting, is it because of ancient Israelite (mis)understandings about biology and procreation, or even two men should not have sex on a woman's bed (presumably because it is ritually unclean)?

Secondly, this law comes amid over six hundred laws ranging from eating shellfish and black-puddings,<sup>8</sup> to wearing clothing made out of mixed materials and so on.

So how do we know which laws apply? Those who wish to say homosexual relations are ruled out on the basis of these passages, but still want to eat prawns, divide the laws into three categories: ceremonial laws, food laws, and moral laws. For these interpreters, the ceremonial and food laws no longer apply, but the moral ones do. However, Leviticus does not divide the laws up this way, and therefore, it is completely arbitrary which laws go in which category. How about the prohibition of having sex with one's wife during the menstrual period? Which category one puts the various laws into depends on a prior decision on what one thinks of homosexuality or menstrual sex. The Levitical code does not help us make a decision on that score. I could be unkind and suggest that generally people are prepared to abandon those laws which they feel apply to themselves and maintain the ones that do not.

Thirdly, do we accept the presuppositions going on? Again, there is the idea that there is a degradation in making a man like a woman, i.e. doing something to a man normally done to a woman. If we are to transcend the patriarchal context of these texts, we are left defending the prohibitions of homosexuality on grounds other than biblical, and it is then incumbent on us to declare what those grounds are.

Fourthly, we need to take into account the context of the laws. The purposes of Levitical laws were two-fold:

1. To determine insiders, belonging to God's covenant.
2. To highlight differences with outsiders.

It is unlikely that neighbouring tribes were doing half of the things mentioned in Leviticus, but it warns against the dangers of stereotyping classes of people on the basis of prejudice alone, and the Old Testament certainly reveals many Hebrew prejudices.

The context is of an insecure small nation surrounded by hostile tribes. There was a need to populate and grow numerically stronger; and so we find a strong procreation ethic. Ancient biology was somewhat different from ours. It was believed (again, exposing a completely sexist context), that male semen carried all that was needed for human life; the whole person was contained in the man's "seed"; the woman simply provided the "soil". Therefore, any use of semen which was used in any way other than procreation was effectively spilling out the

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<sup>8</sup> Black puddings are also ruled out in Acts 15:20, "Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from... consuming blood."

materials of life. So male-male sex not only thwarted a strong procreation ethic, but also wasted the materials of life.

Clearly, most Christians no longer think this. Even the Roman Catholic Church which, while not completely following this line, believes something similar, allows infertile couples to marry, or people, specifically women beyond child-bearing age, to enjoy sexual relations within marriage. Therefore, to deny same-sex relationships on the basis of a procreation ethic untenable. Furthermore, Protestant denominations attribute further value to sexual intercourse; they say it brings two people closer together, strengthening a bond of love. Again, there is no reason why that principle could not be applied to same-sex relationships, unless one were to deny that there was real love between the two, and it is difficult to think of any external basis on which that judgement could be made.

Therefore, there is nothing in the Old Testament, when the contexts and presuppositions are taken into account, that is to apply the basic insights of critical Biblical studies, which can be used to unambiguously rule out same-sex relationships.

## New Testament

We turn now to the New Testament. Three of the relevant passages are in the Pauline corpus and the other comes in the letter of Jude, which recounts the Gomorrah story. I'll deal with the latter first, since it is about time this text was dropped from these kinds of discussions.

Jude 7 in the RSV reads "just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire."

Now if you were to read that translation, you would be forgiven for thinking that it referred to the fact that the men of Sodom were lusting after other males, what the RSV compilers no doubt believed was unnatural lust. In those days, what else would they think? Again, context determines the range of possible thinking about particular issues. However the Greek text reads that they went after *sarkos heteras*, which means "strange flesh", which surely refers to lusting after angels. For if it was a reference to the gender of the object of their lust, then it would be the complete opposite of *heteras*, would it not?

## Romans 1:26-27

The letter to the Romans contains the only alleged reference to lesbianism in the Bible. Verse 26 reads, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural." However, would you know that female same-sex relationships were being talked about here without verse 27? "And likewise the men gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with other men and receiving within their own persons the due penalty for their sins." Verse 26 with a more literal translation of the Greek would read: "Their females

exchanged their natural function for a use which is beyond nature." In this text, the idea is re-enforced that in the biblical world, sex, or more accurately penetration is something *done to* women. The condemnation here, it would seem, is not so much sex between women, but unnatural use of a woman in sexual activity, which may be during heterosexual sex. Paul would, one suspects, have put oral sex into this category.

The fierce procreative ethic remains in the foreground here. Philo, a first century Hellenised Jew, like Paul, had an aversion to same-sex activity, interestingly because he thought it led to infertility - it feminised men, and therefore, his worry would be that whole cities would become depopulated. Similarly, he thought that sex with a barren woman is like copulating with a goat or a pig. He regards such people as being enemies of both God *and nature*. Over-zealous heterosexual sex was unnatural for Philo. He writes:

For the pleasure lovers come together with their wives, not for the sake of sowing children and perpetuating the race, but like pigs or goats hunting the pleasure such intercourse gives.

Similarly Graeco-Roman moralists (people Paul would regard as Gentiles, and therefore pagans), even these pagan moralists like Seneca, Plutarch, and Pythagoras agreed with Philo, that natural sex was only that which produced children, and the desire (a feeling Paul is rather nervous about) could be mis-channelled through both same-sex and heterosexual sex.

In Romans 1:26-7 it is God who gives the men and women over to these dishonourable passions. The resultant passion is the punishment, not the guilt. And the same people who are the subject of the subsequent vice-list: they are filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit... and so on. If anyone wanted to simply read homosexuals into this passage, they would have to say that first, their homosexuality was a God-given punishment on them for prior idolatry, which is the content of Romans 1:18-23, and that all the vices in the vice list are applicable to all homosexuals.<sup>9</sup>

There are several other things going on here. Notice that men are said to have exchanged natural passion for unnatural passion. The discussion of the origins of homosexual orientation is crucial to the credibility of those who wish simply to rip this passage out of its first century context and apply it to our twenty-first century setting. Some conservative scholars, notably Richard Hays, acknowledge that Paul, or any Biblical writer would not have understood modern understandings of orientation, but then carry on as if it were irrelevant. That is simply not good scholarship. If we take the modern scientific consensus that sexual orientation is innate, although influenced by some social factors (and those who do not accept that have to come up with some pretty good reasons not too - and appealing to the Bible [or any ancient document] on this point is insufficient), then we just have to say that the notion of men engaging in sexual activity with other men

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 1:29-32 which includes: "Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarrelling, deception, malicious behaviour, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy..." (NLT).

automatically means that they are acting “contrary to their nature” is not a defensible today.

This “argument from nature” is quite important in Roman Catholic teaching on homosexuality. This natural argument is extremely weak. What we regard as natural and unnatural is constructed - quite simply - according to our knowledge and experience, and is always subject to change, like church teaching and tradition. Each generation must struggle with the question of what it means to live a Christian life in their world. For instance, Pope Leo XII in 1829 ruled that anyone who practised or accepted vaccination was no longer a child of God, because it interfered with God’s sovereignty over life and death; it was not natural.

Furthermore, once again, to accept, without regard for the biblical writers’ contexts, the “argument from nature” we would have to accept the patriarchal and rather unsatisfactory assumption that men are superior to women. Part of Paul’s worry about nature was that men needed to remain men and not be dishonoured into taking a women’s role in sex. Philo writes (in ‘On Abraham’) of the men of Sodom:

They threw from their necks the law of nature and applied themselves to drinking of strong alcohol... and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbours, but also men mounted males without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive... Then, as little by little they accustomed those who were by nature men to submit to play the part of women, they were saddled with the formidable curse of the female disease.

There was a terrible anxiety among men in the ancient world that they may be shamed and become like women. For us to accept this logic, we would have to accept two ideas: that gay sex effectively makes a man a woman, and secondly, that women are so inferior to men that this is a terrible thing. That Paul accepts this way of thinking is found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11, where men are to keep their hair cut short, *because of nature*. Now clearly, if nature were to have its way, all men, or most men, would have very long hair. But what Paul is concerned about is that long hair on a man, makes him appear womanly, and Paul is anxious about that. But notice, for Paul, Christians cannot disagree about the length of a man’s hair, like the situation in Romans 1 - it is *nature* that is at stake.

There is much more that could be said about Romans 1. Romans 1 contains Paul’s general Jewish prejudice against Gentiles; to the Jewish mind Gentiles were idolaters, and from idolatry sprang all manner of evil. In order to use this chapter in contemporary sexual ethics, one has to be selective, not only in the verses selected, but also of the world-view assumed.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9 and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10**

The two other Pauline passages usually employed in discussions of these kinds are 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9 and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:10. These texts are both vice lists and the

words *arsenkoitês* and *malakos* feature; both words are found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, whilst only *arsenkoitês* appears in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy.

The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, *arsenkoitês*, *malakoi*, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers and robbers will not enter the kingdom of heaven - and such were some of you.<sup>10</sup>

Now, it is unlikely Paul asks us to imagine that the members of his congregation had formerly been robbers and so on; rather some of them had been Gentiles, and these are the marks (in Paul's mind) of a Gentile.

Our two words have been translated in various ways, but generally for the purpose of selling bibles rather than accurate translation. *Arsenkoitês* is an obscure word made up of two words "man" and "bed". Therefore, this has been understood to mean a man who lies with another man. Of course, the etymology of a word is no guarantee of meaning. The English word "understand", has nothing to do with standing under anything, and indeed, has nothing to do with the meaning of either "under" or "stand". The word, *arsenkoitês* does not appear in Greek all that often, but when it does, it is usually grouped with other words in vice lists relating to economic disadvantage, such as theft, kidnap, and so on. Therefore, its meaning, although certainly related to some kind of sexual activity, appears to have an economic context; perhaps forced sex, or more likely male prostitution, perhaps in one of the pagan temples.

The practice of translating it as "homosexual" is unwarranted, and can only be driven by prior ideological commitment rather than good translation. If such a rendering of *arsenkoitês* is uncalled for, even more so is the rendering of *malakos*. This is a common word in Greek and means "soft man". The King James renders the word "effeminate". But modern translators shy away from a word related to a disposition and use a word connected to an action. The JB renders it "catamite", the RSV as "sexual perverts", and the NIV as "homosexual offenders". These translations are completely unjustified, and indeed, should make us more alert to the fact that all translations of the Bible are controlled by a theological or ideological agenda: there is no such thing as a neutral translation.

*Malakos* is a common word in Greek and refers to one who wears soft clothes, or has soft skin, or is lazy, decadent, or lacks courage; the ancients would sum it up in one word: womanly. It could refer to men who prettied themselves up generally to aid their chances with women. Certainly, all men who were penetrated (because they played the role of women) were *malakoi*, but not all *malakoi* were penetrated men. Indeed, a man who appeared to love women too much, could be called *malakoi* as an insult.

It is translators, rather than the words Paul wrote, which bring these verses into our discussion. When we read texts critically, we find that not one of the "usual" texts settle any discussion on homosexuality, and we have already noted that the alleged promotion of monogamous heterosexual marriage is not as clear as supposed.

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<sup>10</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:9.

## Using First Century Texts in Modern Ethical Discussions

Reading ancient texts as if they were written to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a dangerous business. It is also rather lazy, for it avoids the hard work of setting the texts in their contexts, uncovering the assumptions in the text, and then working out how those assumptions, that is, what the author was really trying to say, can be worked out in our contemporary Christian lives. It is uncritical.

Appeals to the “plain meaning of scripture” are unconvincing, because words which meant one thing at one time, because of shared assumptions, worldviews, and so on, will mean quite another thing in another time.

We cannot transport ancient biblical words uncritically into our contemporary situations, because we are not asking the same questions. What does the Bible have to say about homosexuality? Simply put: Nothing. Or at least, nothing directly, for its authors would not really know what homosexuality was. When we ask the question the other way; what does the Bible say about heterosexuality? Well, again nothing directly, but if one were to use texts that speak of male-female sexual activity in the same uncritical way as the texts that allegedly speak of homosexuality, you would end up with a rather undesirable sexual ethic. As someone once wrote, “The fact that God gave homosexuals only 6 instructions and heterosexuals 663 doesn’t mean that God loves homosexuals any less; He just thought heterosexuals needed more supervision.”

Christians are going to disagree over this for many years to come. Churches may try to force the issue on a vote. That will not solve anything. It is the nature of how we disagree that counts. I have no problem saying that those who hold an anti-gay position seem less able to conduct discussion in as civil manner as those of us who are more supportive. I do not know why that should be the case, but if one were to base one’s views on letters to newspapers, or church publications, or the appearances of African Bishops on television, one could be forgiven for believing that holding an anti-gay position inevitably comes with having a disagreeable disposition. And I mean this as a sincere and respectful challenge to those who hold a more conservative position than I do.

If the church acknowledges that there are sincere, intelligent, and faithful people on both sides of the debate, and also many in the middle, and the Church not only permits, but encourages respectful dialogue in a culture of openness, then, and only then, can our churches begin to heal its wounds and deep scars. We cannot dialogue respectfully with a gun pointing at our heads, with the threat of witch-hunts, expulsions, and splits. The damage done not only to lesbian and gay Christians, but to the Church’s reputation as we find the only political voices that resonate with some of our anti-gay rhetoric are those of the far right. We are in dangerous territory, and yes, the future of the Church could depend on this next decade.

Within scripture there are models for including the outsider: The breaking down of barriers concerned with food taboos, with the radical theologies that swept away

centuries of God-given laws to include Gentiles into the Christian family. And that wonderful story of the Ethiopian eunuch, for whom there was no impediment to meeting God. But, the trouble with these models is that they still promote the old notions of insiders and outsiders; of barriers between people. They are not perfect, but it's a start.

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