

Sex and Abomination

Summary of the key facts prepared by David Coltheart

The third book of the Bible is called Leviticus, named after the Levites who were the priests, guardians and attendants in the ancient Israelite temple. The book contains a set of laws that has been called the Holiness Code because the word “holy” is repeated frequently throughout chapters 17-26. The laws define how the Israelites were to keep themselves pure and holy before their holy God. Two verses in Leviticus refer to homosexual activity.

“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22).

“If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death (Leviticus 20:13).

We must understand the context and the cultural norms of that day to shed light on the reason for this command. There are several possible explanations, some or all of which may be applicable.

Heterosexual Men

These verses refer to sexual activities between two men (but strangely, not between two women). The Bible assumes that the men involved were heterosexual – the modern concept of homosexual orientation was unknown. These texts do not describe gay men or depict modern gay couples. With rare exceptions, gay men do not have sex with a man because they see that person as a woman – quite the opposite. They prefer men as sexual partners - that is the point of being gay.

Context

The commands of Leviticus 18 and 20 must be read in their cultural and historical context, alongside the limited scientific understanding of the people concerned. Other verses in Leviticus command men not to cut their hair or trim their beards. The victim of a rape had to marry the rapist. The Israelites could purchase both male and female slaves. There were laws against touching dead people, lepers or menstruating women. Leviticus chapters 11-15 contain many laws and regulations concerning ceremonial uncleanness – laws which were broken by Jesus when he touched lepers, dead people, and the woman with a discharge of blood.

The death penalty was required for anyone who cursed his father or mother, for those who committed adultery or murder, or for a man who married his sister. Death also applied for gathering firewood on the Sabbath, worshipping idols, for a stubborn and rebellious son, blasphemy, and for a woman who was not a virgin at her marriage. No one believes these actions require the death penalty today. The context of these laws should determine whether they still apply or not. The problem is that some Christians cherry pick the laws that they think still apply and ignore others that are inconvenient—to them. We have not been given the authority to choose some of the laws in the Holiness Code as binding today, while ignoring others

Israelite Culture

Ancient Israelite society was heavily gendered. Men and women had very specific roles to fill, depending on the circumstances. The Holiness Code established specific gender boundaries for Israelite men and women. Violations of these boundaries and roles appear to have been frowned upon. Loving, long-term same-sex relationships did not meaningfully exist in ancient Israelite culture. The culture was tribal and offspring were essential to survival in their primitive agricultural economy. There were rigid distinctions between women’s work and men’s work. If two men had lived together as a couple, for example, one of them would have been obliged to do women’s work, and the presence of a man working among the women of the village would not have been tolerated.

Separation

The Holiness Code includes many laws that emphasise how the Israelites were to be different from other pagan nations, including Egypt where they had just come from, and the nations they would be surrounded by when living in Palestine. Chapter 18 begins: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices” (Leviticus 18:1-3) There follows a long list of mostly sexual practices that they are to avoid. They are commanded to keep themselves distinct and separate from the idolatrous nations around them. The context of the verses about men lying with men is separation from the practices of the heathen nations around them.

Gender Mixing

The Holiness Code was designed to keep the Israelites separate and different from the Egyptians from whom they had escaped, and to warn them against mixing with the Canaanites into whose land they had now come. They must remain pure in culture, customs and worship forms. They were not to intermarry with non-Israelites. The Holiness Code also forbade ploughing a field with an ox and a donkey yoked together; sowing a field with two kinds of seed; or wearing clothing made of two different kinds of materials.

In religious service and participation, labour assignments, economic functioning, family roles, and a host of other areas, the ancient Israelite writings spelled out varying degrees of gender delineation. The same delineation applies to sexual matters. When a man took the passive role of a woman he was, in effect, mixing genders, hence the prohibition against men lying with men.

Idolatry and Fertility Rites

Idolatry is the worship of idols representing false gods. Directly preceding the command about two men lying together is the command that forbids the sacrifice of children to the ancient Canaanite god, Molech, (Leviticus 18:21). The context suggests that both behaviours are prohibited as idolatrous practices. The first few verses of Leviticus 20 are even more specific. Anyone who worshipped Molech was to be stoned to death, and the rules about sex that follow should be read in that context.

The worship of pagan fertility gods was accompanied by unbridled sexual orgies, regardless of family relationships or the sex of either partner. The cultic rituals imitated their beliefs in a primeval chaos, out of which the gods created life on earth. Both male and female temple prostitutes were common at ancient temples down to Roman times, allowing worshippers to connect with the deity in a magical way. They believed that sexual acts performed as worship would bring blessings from the god or goddess, and ensure the fertility of the soil, the successful growth of crops and the reproduction of their livestock. Male seed was a gift to the god or goddess, and depositing semen in the body of a priest was believed to guarantee immortality. Sexual orientation was not a factor in who took part in the fertility rituals. Ancient civilisations had no concept of gay versus straight people.

The prohibition against male-male sexual acts was part of the larger condemnation of idolatrous worship rites. The Israelites were strictly warned not to have anything to do with idolatry and commanded not to serve, nor to let their children serve, as temple prostitutes (Deuteronomy 23:17, 18). God did not want the Israelites to practice the many perverted or detestable kinds of behaviour common in the pagan nations around them. No doubt these practices were what made idolatry such a temptation to the Israelites.

Domination

The wording of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 suggests domination of one person over another. Sexual relations in ancient times were never between social equals. Sexuality was a combination of dominance and submission and the definition of sex assumed that every sex act required a dominant penetrator and someone who was penetrated. Women in ancient (and Biblical) times were subservient to men and were considered as property that could be bought and sold. For a Jewish male, the ultimate insult was to be thought of, or treated as a female. Jewish men thanked God in their daily prayers that they were not born a woman! Being considered feminine or being feminised by another was the worst thing that could happen to a man.

One Jewish interpretation of the two passages in Leviticus is that only sexual penetration of a male by another male is forbidden, suggesting that other forms of sex between males is permissible. The text portrays the penetrated male as if he were a woman—the words read literally, “as though a woman.” In a patriarchal society where male superiority and authority was supreme, a man who played the role of a woman by being penetrated by another man was demeaning the male role. This law, many believe, is concerned with male superiority and masculinity. Equal relationships are not in view. Anal penetration of a male by another male may have been forbidden because it violated the patriarchal notion of male superiority.

Ancient Reproductive Beliefs

In Biblical times, people believed that male seed contained all that was needed to reproduce life. A woman contributed nothing to the new life – her body was simply the incubator. In a “populate or perish” situation where the Israelites needed to conquer and take over their Promised Land, human seed could not be “wasted” in non-procreative sex, especially as it was thought to be a finite resource.

Male semen was considered ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:16). Any man who discharged semen for whatever reason, such as sexual activity or a nocturnal emission, had to bathe his whole body in a complex cleansing ceremony and to wash his clothes if necessary. His partner had to do likewise and both of them remained ritually “unclean” until the evening. No wonder parts of the Old Testament that refer to sex seem almost paranoid about the presumed “uncleanness” of the act.

Changing Sexual Ethics

Christians commonly regard a number of Biblical sexual rules, especially in the Old Testament, as not applicable today. For example, while Christians would agree with the Bible in condemning incest, rape, adultery and intercourse with animals, we disagree with the Bible on most other sexual activities that the Bible prohibits, including:

- intercourse during menstruation
- celibacy
- marriage outside national (Israelite) boundaries, known as exogamy
- naming of sexual organs
- nudity (under certain conditions)
- masturbation (although some Christians still condemn this)
- birth control (although many Christians still condemn this).

The Bible regarded semen and menstrual blood as unclean (for religious or ceremonial reasons), which most Christians do not. In addition, the Bible permitted sexual behaviours that we today condemn or have discontinued, including:

- prostitution
- polygamy
- concubinage
- levirate marriage (marriage of a woman to a brother of her deceased husband)
- sex with slaves
- treatment of women as property
- very early marriage of girls (11-13 years of age).

While the Old Testament accepted divorce, Jesus forbade it. In short, of the sexual mores mentioned above, we agree with the Bible only on four of them, and disagree with the Bible on sixteen! The sexual ethic articulated in the first five books of the Bible relates to purity system and property laws that do not apply to our society today.

The point is that Christians have been, and still are, selective in the sexual rules that they consider should apply today. Why do Christians appeal to certain proof texts in the Old Testament in the case of homosexuality, when the same Christians feel perfectly free to disagree with Scripture on most other sexual practices? Obviously, many of our choices in these matters are arbitrary.

An Alternative Translation

All Bible translations are made according to the understanding of the scholars who do the translation. In that sense, all translations are interpretations. Each Bible translation reflects the translator’s world view, beliefs and mind set. All versions of the Bible are funded by religious organisations whose translators follow a specific theological belief system. Their personal biases distort their work. An additional complexity is that modern society is very different from that of Biblical times. Sometimes there is no current English word that exactly matches a Hebrew or Greek term. Scholars choose the words that they think expresses the thought, while at the same time unconsciously inserting their own prejudices into the text.

The Hebrew text of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 translated word-for-word reads:

“And with a male you shall not lay lyings of a woman”.

Literally translated into English, it is obvious that there are words missing. However, the precise meaning in Hebrew is ambiguous and is not explained by the context. Additional words must be added to make sense. As a result, there have been different suggested translations to smooth out the awkwardness of the Hebrew.

Many Bible versions follow the traditional translation and add the words “as the” to read: *“And with a male you shall not lay [as the] lyings of a woman.”* In other words, a man must not have intercourse with another man as he would have with a woman, i.e. anal intercourse.

Other equally valid Bible translations insert the words “in the” to read: “*And with a male you shall not lay [in the] lyings of a woman.*” Translated literally, the text says that two men must not engage in sexual activities on a woman's bed. Presumably, they must go elsewhere to have sex. A woman's bed was sacred and was to be reserved for her use only. Only her husband was permitted there, and then only under certain circumstances. Any other use of her bed would be result in defilement. A literal translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 does not prohibit all same-sex behaviour; the commands do not even prohibit all male same-sex activities. Rather than forbidding male-male sexual activity, the text simply restricts where it may occur.

Financial Pressures on Bible Translators

One reason that most versions opt for the traditional interpretation rather than the literal translation is financial. If a Bible translation appears to vary even slightly from the theological and moral expectations of the majority of potential buyers, then the publication of that Bible is doomed. Publishers won't even touch it. Thus, a truly accurate Bible would probably be a financial failure, and might never see the light of day.

For example, the New International Version (NIV), one of the most popular modern versions, translates Leviticus 18:22 as: “*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.*” The New Living Translation (NLT) widens the translation to also include lesbians, a translation not warranted by the Hebrew words: “*Do not practice homosexuality; it is a detestable sin.* Both versions are pitched at the traditional Christian market that views homosexuality as evil.

Imagine what would happen to Bible sales if this verse read: “*Two men must not engage in sexual activity on a woman's bed; it is ritually unclean.* Generations of Christians have been conditioned to expect this verse to condemn all male same-sex activity as “an abomination.” Bible readers would assume the translation is defective and accuse the translators of distorting the original meaning of the passage in order to be politically correct. Preachers and theologians would rage against the changes, and readers would not buy the Bible. Uproars over much less emotionally charged issues have already occurred on the release of new translations.

Abomination

The sexual act in these verses is described as an “abomination,” from the Hebrew word *toevah*. This is the term for a ritually unclean thing or person and appears over 100 times in the Old Testament. The word can also be translated simply as “uncleanness,” “impurity” or “dirtiness.” Another accurate translation is “taboo,” something that is culturally or ritually forbidden. If the text was intended to condemn male-male sexual activities as a moral evil, the author could have used another Hebrew word *zimah*. This word means, not what is objectionable for religious or cultural reasons, but something that is morally wrong. It means an injustice, a sin – but this word is conspicuous by its absence. The word *toevah* indicates that the command was against a purity violation, not a clear ethical or moral violation. The command only says that it is ritually unclean, like coming too close to a dead body, or eating shellfish, or getting a tattoo.

Conclusion

There is nothing in these verses to suggest the loving relationship between two equals. Nor do these verses reflect the modern concept of sexual identity. The commands of Leviticus 18:22 or 20:13 were not intended to prohibit a form of homosexual relationship that did not exist at the time. We cannot insert the modern phenomenon of a same-sex couple living together in a monogamous lifetime relationship back into the ancient text.

When read in textual and historical context, the prohibitions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are clearly directed at religious ritual sex. There is no condemnation of committed, lifelong relationships but only of homosexual acts connected with prostitution or idolatry, or that violated ancient purity laws or cultural norms of the day. There is no hint in these texts of a loving, faithful, monogamous, mutually supportive relationship that characterises many, including Christian, same-sex relationships.

This summary of Bible evidence was prepared by David Coltheart using many different sources.

Sources that deserve mention are:

<http://wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/>

<http://www.gaychristian101.com/>

http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibl.htm#menu

<http://www.someone-to-talk-to.net/>

<http://www.stopbibleabuse.org>