

Softies and Man-bedders

Summary of the key facts prepared by David Coltheart

Two of Paul's letters preserved in the New Testament include what are known as "vice lists". These lists of immoral actions were written to call new Christians out of sinful lifestyles and exhort them to purer and holier lives. The two lists are found in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9,10. Paul used two words around which doubt and ambiguity has existed for centuries and are the source of continuing controversy today. The Greek words are *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. The words have been variously, but incorrectly, translated as "perverts", "male prostitutes", "homosexuals" or "effeminate".

In the King James Version of the Bible, the words are translated somewhat ambiguously as "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." The Revised Standard Version in 1946, reflecting an increasing political and social bias of the mid-20th century, was the first translation to use the word "homosexual" and this opened the floodgates for other modern translations to follow. The New International Version translates the texts as follows:

"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor male prostitutes (*malakos*) nor homosexual offenders (*arsenokoites*) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor 6:9,10)

"We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for adulterers and perverts (*arsenokoites*), for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine." (1 Timothy 1:9,10)

Since the same words are used in both verses, the following explanation applies to both references.

Malakos

All theologians agree that *malakos* means "soft" (KJV) or "fine" (NIV) and is used in every other place in the Bible to describe the clothing of rich people (Matt 11:8; Luke 7:25). The meaning of the word is not linked to sexual matters. When used as a noun, the word refers to the kind of people who wear soft or fine clothing – wealthy people who see no need for God in their lives and trust in their own riches for salvation.

Outside the New Testament, the word was used to describe people who were dissolute, cowardly, lazy, weak, sickly, lacking self-control, unstable or easily influenced, none of which have any specific homosexual connotations. Later the word was sometimes used as a pejorative attack on a man's masculinity, a form of misogyny that saw women as weak and inferior.

Modern Bible translators have translated *malakos* to describe the passive partner in a homosexual relationship. However, the translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9 in a sexual context is totally unwarranted and reflects long-held bias.

Arsenokoites

The word *arsenokoites* is used only twice in the Bible and only in these two texts. The meaning of the word is unclear and all translations are only interpretative. The KJV translation "abusers of themselves with mankind" is ambiguous and vague, and reflects 17th century bias. The modern translation "homosexuals" is misleading. The word has only been used in this context since the year 1946 and reflects contemporary bias.

Because the word appears in a list format in both texts, the context is insufficient to determine the original meaning. For this reason, translations into English and other languages are little more than guesses. Some liberal Christians insist it refers to pimps or pederasts, but there's no more evidence to support this meaning than any other.

Male Bedder

The word *arsenokoites*, is a combination of the words for male (*arsen*) and bed (*koite*). Literally, the word means “male bedders”. The word *arsen* is an adjective derived from one of the Greek words for man: *arren*. The word *koite* (bed) is a noun and is a feminine word. Unlike English, words in other languages are often “masculine” or “feminine” words – in French for example, table is a feminine word: “la table.”

However, to understand the word simply by looking at its constituent parts is not helpful. For example, the expression “lady killer” does not mean a lady who kills nor a person who kills ladies but a man who knows how to charm women. Another example is the word “understand,” which does not mean simply “stand under”. A third example is the word “chairman”, which has nothing to do with the word “chair” (originally the word for “throne”) and does not define the gender of the person. The chairman of the board may be a woman – hence the politically correct term “chairperson” or simply “chair” to refer to that position. The English language is not always logical.

First Example in Literature

Paul’s use of *arsenokoite* is the first known example of this word in any ancient literature. Paul may have invented the word, using the ancient Greek translation of the Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 where *arsen* and *koites* appear as two separate words. If so, Paul may have had a particular 1st century AD situation in mind – one that is not apparent in the 21st century. The second part of the word, *koites* is commonly used for “lying with” and when used in this way refers to the “active” or penetrating partner in a sexual relationship. However, the word is unclear and could be interpreted in different ways.

The word *arsenokoites* may refer to:

- a man having intercourse with a woman (*koites* is a feminine word).
- a woman having intercourse with a man (the one who beds males)
- a man who sexually penetrates another man (a bias reflected from the mid 19th century)
- a male who is sexually penetrated by another male.

However, if Paul was referring to intercourse between two males, he could have used another common word *androkoities*. The fact that he did not is significant.

Arsenkoites in Later Literature

The word *arsenokoites* was used sparingly in later Greek literature. Most of the references to the word are merely quotations, in Greek and without explanation, of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9,10. The word appears to denote someone involved in economic exploitation and appears next to words such as robber, swindler or thief.

In four instances in the *Sibylline Oracles*, *Acts of John*, and *To Autolychus* the word refers to abusive power relationships, exploitation and violence in the sex business, such as pimping and forced prostitution. The term remains ambiguous. Perhaps the best translation is the literal, and deliberately ambiguous, expression “male bedders.”

Exploitive Sexual Behaviour

In 1 Corinthians 6:9 *arsenokoites* is followed by "thief", and in 1 Timothy the same word is followed by "slave-trader." The term could be referring to a pimp who profits from selling the services of prostitutes. Or it might refer to a man who pays for the services of a prostitute. Or it may refer to a prostitute, possibly in a religious context such as a temple where fertility gods were worshipped. Although we cannot be absolutely sure what is meant here, these words do refer to a specific kind of exploitive sexual behaviour.

In the culture in which *arsenokoitai* originated, the meaning was closest either to pederasty or to a man engaged in exploitive sex with a male with some sort of trade or money involved. Such relationships were not and are not equal-status relationships -- one partner has power, while the other is being used and degraded.

Sexual Orientation

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 6:11, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified.” Some have concluded that Paul says that they *were* homosexuals, but have changed *to become* heterosexuals, proving that orientation can be changed. However, Paul had no knowledge of sexual orientation. Obviously, people who were involved in prostitution could change their behaviour, but they may not have been homosexual in orientation. In Paul’s world, a free, male Roman citizen had the privilege of finding sexual gratification with anyone, male or female, who was considered his inferior – women, men, or slaves of either sex.

Modern studies have demonstrated that human sexual orientation cannot be changed, though behaviour may be modified. From a scientific point of view, Paul’s statement cannot be used about modern sexual orientation, heterosexual or homosexual.

The word *arsenokotai* does not refer to women in any way. Yet, when *arsenokoitai* was mistranslated to “homosexual,” the word, by definition, immediately included women as well as men. The translation shift of *arsenokoitai* from men who engage in exploitative sex with males to “homosexual” referring to both men and women appears to have been prompted by modern sexual bias against the gay and lesbian community.

Uncertain Meaning

The force of Paul’s warnings was probably instrumental in helping to eliminate temple prostitution. This left behind a word of uncertain meaning that Paul sternly disapproved of something, but audiences were left to fill in the blank. The word *arsenokoites* has been variously interpreted through the centuries as child molestation, anal/oral intercourse with one’s wife, or masturbation depending on the particular bias of the church at the time. The particular translation bias has varied down through history according to the power structures within the church. The latest meaning, since the mid 20th century, is (male) homosexuality.

The closest meaning of *arsenokoitai* over five hundred years of translation was men who took the active role in nonprocreative sex. *Arsenokoitai* did not define what we would call the sexual orientation of a person; it only indicated the role played in the sexual act. Other equally valid translations of *arsenokoites* include “sex traffickers,” “sexual exploiters,” “rapists,” “sexual predators” and “pimps.” The history of the treatment of people in the LGBTIQ community would have been very different if Bible translators had used these words instead.

The end result of a lot of research is that the meaning of *arsenokoites* is obscure and uncertain. One prominent investigator of the meaning of *arsenokoites*, Dr Dale Martin of Yale University comments: “I should be clear about my claims here. I am not claiming to know what *arsenokoites* meant, I am claiming that *no one* knows what it meant.”

Not many others are so humble; most have their favourite candidates for its meaning. In the case of those opposed to gay and lesbian people, the meaning is confidently given as something akin to “a practicing homosexual.” Variations on this theme depend on the writer’s political leanings. All such translations betray a serious ignorance – often intentional – of both ancient Greek and the culture in which the word was used. Persons who hold such views reveal an entrenched political position – nothing more.

Conclusion

The interpretations of *arsenokoites* and *malakos* that condemn modern homosexuality have been driven more by ideological interests in marginalizing gay and lesbian people than by the general rules of Biblical interpretation and historical criticism. We cannot generalize from these verses that all homosexuals will be denied an inheritance in the kingdom of God.

Perhaps the best modern interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:9,10 is from The Message:

“Don’t you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don’t care about God will not be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don’t qualify as citizens in God’s kingdom.”

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>