

## ***What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality***

A Bible Study offered by Jack McKinney

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### **Introduction**

I have two problems with the title of this series. First, I can give you the answer right now about what the Bible says concerning homosexuality and save you several Wednesday nights of your life. The Bible doesn't say anything about homosexuality, at least not in the modern definition of the term. My second problem is that I don't think the Bible operates as an answer book that we pose questions to. I disagree with that method of reading the scriptures. You will hear more about that as we go along, but I want to state that reservation up front.

So why do the series? All of us have seeds planted from our religious traditions. Some of those seeds have produced weeds. The weeds are made manifest when lesbians and gay men suffer emotional and psychological pain because their faith tradition teaches them that they are sinners in the eyes of God. Other people have weeds that flower into bigotry and discrimination based on their religious heritage. I'm doing this study to help some of you begin to dig out the weeds, and remind others of us who have already dug the weeds out that it's important that we keep offering the same "weeding" help to others.

It's easy to forget what a central role the few verses in the Bible that discuss sexual contact between people of the same sex play in the ongoing spiritual destruction of gay and lesbian children of God. Thirty percent of teenagers who commit suicide are gay. Gays and lesbians are murdered every week in our world simply because of their sexual orientation. If you are gay and want to get married, of course you cannot. If you want to be a parent, it will be more than difficult. Why do all of these things continue to happen in our sophisticated, modern world? Part of the answer lies in these few verses found in the Bible.

Clearly I enter into this study with a bias. However, I think that the bias we bring with us is far better supported by biblical scholarship than the bias that says erroneously, "The Bible condemns homosexuals." It's not true and this study is meant to show why that is not true.

### **Two Prior Questions**

Before we ask what the Bible says about homosexuality, however, there are at least two prior questions we need to ask ourselves. First, what role does the Bible play in my life? Second, how should I read the Bible?

The first question is a question of authority. How much authority does the Bible have over you? Is it ever appropriate to reject something the Bible says? What other sources of authority should we consider?

The second question is one of technique. How should we read the Bible? Two approaches that are most popular are the literal approach and the historical-critical approach. The literal approach is what most of us grew up with, and it is part of what gets us in trouble. The Bible is not a book

that was written to be read literally, at least in the sense that we usually understand that term. A literal approach has no flexibility when texts are in conflict, it has no ability to help us answer the modern issues of our lives, and it violates the spirit in which the Bible was written. The Bible is not a technical manual.

The historical-critical approach was developed in the nineteenth century to take seriously the historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which the Bible was written. In other words, this approach tries to understand what the original writers really meant and were talking about when they wrote the words. This approach can be frustrating because we are not all biblical scholars, and even scholars struggle to understand what some of these ancient writings meant. We will see this especially in a couple of the passages we look at that supposedly deal with homosexuality. I think a narrative approach to the scripture is very helpful. There is a power to some of the stories in the Bible that is important to appreciate regardless of the literal truth of those accounts.

### **Genesis 19:1-11 – The Sin of Sodom**

**Traditional Interpretation:** Since the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, this text has been used to condemn homosexuality. Around that time the term sodomite came to refer to male homogenital acts.

#### **Issues to Consider**

1. The key to understanding this passage is understanding the role of “hospitality” in the ancient world. There was a legal and cultural presumption that one would offer refuge and security for the stranger, even if that stranger was associated with the enemy. This system of hospitality sustained people who were vulnerable or who were in foreign lands.
2. It is important to distinguish between rape and sex in this passage. The passage describes a mob scene where the intent is to rape and abuse the strangers. In battle scenes it was not unusual for men to rape other men to show superiority and demean the enemy, not as a signal of sexual orientation.

#### **The Interesting Twist**

1. One principle of biblical interpretation is that you should allow the Bible to interpret the Bible. Other passages in the Bible repeatedly refer to the sin of Sodom, and that sin never has anything to do with homosexuality. The sin is always associated with the lack of hospitality offered by the citizens of Sodom.
2. A more accurate reading of this story would result in the support for taking in the outsider and providing care and protection. Who is more of an outsider in our culture than gay men and lesbians? Instead, the church has consistently used the passage to reject those very people and, therefore, repeatedly commit the sin of Sodom.

## **Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 – The Abomination Texts**

**Traditional Interpretation:** These texts demonstrate that homosexuality is such a heinous sin that it is deserving of capital punishment.

### **Issues to Consider**

1. The Holiness Code is a religious code found in the book of Leviticus. The purpose of the code was to enforce purity among the Jews who lived amongst the Canaanite culture. The difference between this code and legal codes found in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is that the purpose is to shape identity, not speak about morality or ethics. Dietary laws, what one could wear, and a host of other rules were in place to keep the children of Israel unstained from the cultures around them. The two “abomination” texts fall in the Holiness Code and are part of this system of keeping pure from foreign contamination. Christians have never considered these purity laws as having any authority for them. We laugh about prohibitions against eating shellfish or wearing a garment made of two different fabrics (just two of many prohibitions found in the Holiness Code that have never been followed by Christians), but then we pull out these “abomination” texts as authoritative. The selectivity in this approach is beyond hypocritical.
2. Capital punishment is used in many instances in the Hebrew Bible as a way of enforcing the patriarchal structure (e.g., the cursing of parents was a capital offense).

### **The Interesting Twist**

1. The word abomination carries such weight in the way we have heard it as God’s most repulsed reaction to certain sins. In reality, the word means “unclean” and refers to impurity in these texts instead of sinfulness.
2. Purity laws are found in all cultures, however, as a way of maintaining identity. One example would be Catholics who will not eat meat on Friday. This doesn’t mean that Catholics believe that Protestants who eat meat on Fridays are morally wrong. It is simply a way of identifying themselves as Catholics.
3. Lesbians get a free ride in these texts. The prohibition is against men penetrating men. This penetration was the source of the unclean act that made one ritually impure.

## **Romans 1:18-32 (esp. 26 and 27) – The Unnatural Passage**

**Traditional Interpretation:** This is a comprehensive condemnation of gay men and lesbians, and their unnatural sex acts result in God’s judgment upon them.

## Issues to Consider

1. There is great debate over the Romans passage. Conservatives use this passage more than any other as a clear condemnation of gays and lesbians. If this is the definitive biblical text on homosexuality, however, it is easy to see how absurd it is to say the Bible has much to say on the subject.
2. Some scholars argue that Paul is condemning the sexual behavior of the Romans as a larger denunciation against the idolatrous practices in the Gentile world (temple prostitution of both the heterosexual and homosexual variety was common).
3. John Boswell argues that the verses appearing to condemn homosexuality fall within a larger Pauline denunciation of the Gentile world. Same sex acts are but a “mundane” analogy of this theological point. Moreover, the crux of Paul’s analogy focuses on heterosexuals acting against their “nature” to commit same-sex acts. Early church writings about this passage support Boswell’s contention that church fathers regarded this text as a statement about heterosexuals.

## The Interesting Twist

The main point Paul drives toward in the first chapters of Romans is that we are all sinners who have fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). Yet, God’s grace and love is sufficient for all of us. To use Romans 1 as a specific denunciation of gay people is to completely miss and undermine Paul’s point.

## 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 – Abusive Sexual Relationships

**Traditional Interpretation:** These two passages state that homosexuals are clearly denounced and will not be allowed into heaven.

## Issues to Consider

1. There is strong disagreement about what the key words in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 mean. *Malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* have been interpreted as one thing or as two separate things in different translations. These words are variously translated as “sexual perverts” (Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament), “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” (New Revised Standard Version), “homosexuals” (Revised Standard Version), “the self-indulgent” (New Jerusalem Bible), and prior to the sixteenth century the word *malakoi* was consistently interpreted as “masturbators.” Such confusion in the biblical translations reveals how little we know about what these words actually mean.
2. The best modern biblical scholars also disagree on what is being described in these texts. *Malakoi* has been translated as “loose, wanton, unrestrained” (John Boswell), “wasteful of both sexual and financial resources,” (William Countryman), or “effeminate, but not in terms of sexual orientation” (Robin Scroggs). Boswell and

Countrymen suggest that *arsenokoitai* refers to “male prostitutes,” while Scroggs seems convinced that the word is a reference to “pederasty” or the practice of an older man taking advantage of a younger boy.

### **The Interesting Twist**

1. There is no clear indication that these words are even referring to homogenital sex. The variety of ways in which biblical translations have handled these words points to the fact that there is no consensus. There is a stronger case to be made that *arsenokoitai* does refer to male-male sexual contact, but in no way is it clear that it refers to homosexuality.
2. While Bible translations and modern biblical scholars disagree about what these words mean or refer to specifically, there is a general consensus that the actions being denounced in these texts are about abuse, not sexual orientation. Whether the abuse is loose and careless sexual behavior in general, the abuses related to prostitution, or the abuse of pederasty, there is no equivalent between what is being judged in these texts and the loving commitment of people in same-gender relationships.

### **Conclusions**

1. We have been told that the Bible clearly denounces homosexuality. In reality, there is not a single text in the scripture that talks about the psychological or sociological definitions of homosexuality. The only passages that may even suggest a larger discussion on the issue paint the love between people of the same gender in a positive light (David and Jonathan).
2. This study reveals the danger of a literal reading of the scriptures. Sometimes what the Bible says changes from translation to translation. It is important that we dig deep enough to get a more complete picture of what the Bible is or isn't talking about. But how should we read the Bible, especially if we have little training or knowledge about its contents? Start by remembering the big, overarching themes in the Bible: God's love for all people; the importance of justice in relationships; the care of those who are neglected and abused; the emphasis on sacrifice and service. As you read the texts make sure these larger themes are part of your interpretation. Also, be careful not to fall into the pattern of reading the Bible like a book of rules. Let the power of the narratives have sway over you. Sometimes that requires doing research to figure out what the real story is behind a passage. Much of the power and positive influence the Bible has over us comes out of the role of biblical narratives in our lives.

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