

Homosexuality, A Survey of the Biblical Texts

The following is a brief survey on the various interpretations of Biblical texts on the issue of homosexuality, more specifically homosexual behavior/sex. It is in no way meant to be exhaustive or even fully coherent- they're more like notes than sustained arguments, and I have taken an approach that seeks to explain more fully one view and give some (not all) counter arguments. The arguments have been gleaned mostly from the following, more academic (vs. popular), works (I would encourage you to use them for deeper study for yourself):

Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views by Dan O. Via and Robert A.J. Gagnon (good first start)

Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality by Jack Rodgers (in favor of homosexuality as acceptable, from a Presbyterian USA perspective)

The Bible and Homosexual Practice by Robert A.J. Gagnon (traditional view, quite comprehensive)

(Jack Rodgers and Robert Gagnon each have their respective websites: www.drjackroddgers.com, and www.robagnon.net. Two very popular sites covering the range of ideas (but not used in this paper) are: <http://gaychristian.net> and <http://www.exodus-international.org>)

Through my study, I land on the side of the traditional view, one that sees the Bible as uniformly identifying homosexual behavior/sex as sin. I would follow that statement up with the statement that I believe the Bible's picture of a marriage union, before God's eyes, is between man and woman (this is in response to the idea that two gay/lesbian individuals can have a celibate Christian marriage before God. See below for a brief statement).

Given these conclusions, however, I do recognize that nuances exist.

- Is there a difference between homosexual behavior and homosexual orientation? Do the biblical prohibitions speak to the latter?
- Should there be a difference between marriage as defined by the state (a civil marriage), versus the Biblical definition of marriage?

Even though I have some opinions here, I think that Jesus followers who hold to the traditional view can differ in these two areas of nuances (see <http://gaychristian.net>, "Side B", for an example). Our discussion on October 19, 2008, is in part to explore these nuances in our current day.

Of course, I would be amiss if I didn't note that there are some bigger issues that Jesus followers always need to hold on to, including the need to love our neighbor in the LGBT community. In too many corners of the church, Jesus followers have been overly judgmental, even hateful, reacting more like homophobes than Jesus followers (God forgive us and cause us to repent). Friendship across barriers in all aspects of our society is key, even if we disagree on some very deep issues. In fact, this is exactly what tolerance is- loving each other despite our differences (as opposed to a more popular but incorrect definition that says that everyone's belief is equally true and should be accepted by everyone as equally true).

God be with us as we seek to love Him and our neighbor, in all holiness, kindness, and truth.

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Genesis 19:4-11, Judges 19:22-25

Interpretation in favor of homosexuality

- These stories are about condemning gang rape, not contemporary consensual homosexual relationships.
- These stories are about men protecting other men from being dishonored in a patriarchal society (being a passive/receiving male partner in a homosexual relationship would be dishonoring)
- The city of Sodom is put down in the OT for sins not associated with homosexual acts: greed, injustice, inhospitality, excess wealth, etc. (eg. Isa. 1:10-17, Luke 10:12, Matt. 10:15, 2 Peter 2:6)

Rebuttal/Traditional Interpretation

- Ezek. 16:50 condemns Sodom for doing “abominable things.” This term is also used in Lev. 18:22 to describe homosexual acts.
- Jude 7 focuses the sins of the city on sexual immorality. Some would counter that the lust for “strange flesh” is about the people were in the wrong for wanting to have sex with angelic visitors, but in Genesis no one knows the people are angels. It seems to be against men wanting sex with other men.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

Interpretation in favor of homosexuality:

- This is not about sin, but “uncleanness.” Uncleanness is something that reflects the idea of completeness and wholeness, where categories should not be mixed (eg. Lev. 19:19 about clothes being made of two materials), where something needs to reflect that class to which it belongs (eg. Lev. 11:9-12- sea creatures with no scales and fins are unclean). It also non-intentional, having nothing to do with motive- it just gets on you (Lev. 15:19)
- For the OT people, then, this was bad because it: a) made people unclean, disallowing them to relate to God and other people. This was more of a cultural issue, given that homosexuality in Israel a) compromised the purity in the production of male heirs, b) violated the boundaries that made Israel different from nations, c) was an affront to male honor in a patriarchal society, given that the man being penetrated was a violation of masculine honor (see Genesis 19:4-11 Judges 19:22-25)
- In light of Mark 7:1-23, Jesus declares that physical things cannot defile the heart/soul. What defiles come from the heart/soul. Therefore Jesus makes annuls the OT category of uncleanness.

Rebuttal/Traditional Interpretation

- It is categorized as sin Lev. 18:25.
- There is a differentiation between what is intentional, and what happens to you. Eg- there is no penalty in Leviticus for someone who got raped, but there is for wilfull acts (including homosexuality).
- The acts are called “abominations,” which is used for expressing moral fault.
- With Mark 7, see below on “Jesus and Homosexuality.”

Romans 1:24-27

Interpretation in favor of homosexuality

- Paul actually reinterprets homosexuality as sin rather than uncleanness. It comes from a distorted the mind and heart, and is person, chosen, against God.
- However, Paul’s is speaking out of a context where he only understood people as having a heterosexual orientation. Therefore he is condemning people who act against their natural orientation- heterosexuals should not do homosexual acts because it is unnatural. If Paul was here today, knowing that homosexual orientation was discovered to be quite natural and scientific, he would say that homosexual oriented people are allowed to acts to their natural orientation.

Rebuttal/Traditional Interpretation

- Nothing in Romans 1:24-27 suggests that homosexuality is chosen against a heterosexual orientation. The “exchange” and “leaving behind” do not point to choosing homosexual behavior over heterosexual desire, but choosing behavior stimulated by fallen passions over behavior motivated by nature. Furthermore, these desires seem to be there already; there was perhaps a homosexual orientation anyway (eg.- “inflamed with their yearning,” etc.)

- Nature/what is natural refers to what reflects the creation of Genesis 1-2/the creation order. This is seen in the amount of transferred words from Genesis 1:26-31 (note especially Gen. 1:26 cp. Rom. 1:23; Gen. 1:27 cp. Rom 1:26-27). This is seen in context, and in careful study of the word *physis* (translated nature).
- Nature/what is natural, in context, can also be defined as what is natural based on the observation of what is created. In Romans 1:19-20, a parallel passage, Paul notes that unbelieving people should understand, based on observations of nature, how best to worship God. Given that the anatomy of female/male sexual organs and the reproductive aspect of intercourse, what is “natural” is male/female sex.¹
- These arguments (along with others not mentioned here) also go against homosexual interpretations that try and interpret Paul as a) critiquing just exploitative forms of homosexual behavior (pedastry, prostitution, sex in the context of idol worship) and b) being a misogynist- fearing that homosexual unions would upset the dominance of men over women.

1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10

Interpretation in favor of homosexuality

- The two words used in reference to homosexual acts- *arsenokoites* and *malakos* are hard to interpret. For example, *arsenokoites* is used for the first time in Greek or Jewish literature by Paul.
- Although *arsenokoities* is literally made of two words that suggest men sleeping with men- male (*arsen*) and bed (*koites*)- this is a bad way to find the meaning of words, much like the English word “butterfly” (which is not a slab of butter mixed with a fly). Usage of the word in other contexts points to some sort of economic exploitation by sexual means, eg.- prostitution, pimping, etc.
- *Malakos* literally means “soft” and often connotes effeminacy. However, in the cultural context, a lack of self-control, yielding to pleasure, decadent living, etc. were a sign of effeminacy. Therefore, to think this refers to homosexuality is a bad jump.

Rebuttal/Traditional Interpretation

- *Malakos*- while it does have a wide range of meaning, the context (with the serious penalty of excluding from God’s kingdom) suggests that a sin issue is involved. Note also the words prior and after all relate to sexual immorality.
- Philo’s (a contemporary historian writing in Greek) usage of the word unambiguously points to men being like women in regard to receiving other men for sex. See Gagnon, 308-312.
- *Arsenokoites* was most likely constructed by Greek speaking Jews, based on the Lev. 18:22, 20:13 texts on homosexuality (both components of the word are used in those verses). All other usages afterward refer to homosexual acts- some involve exploitations, others do not. Futhermore, it seems that Paul’s concern within the lists are not about exploitation.

Jesus and Homosexuality

Interpretation in favor of homosexuality

- One line of thinking:
 - a) Homosexuality in the OT Levitical laws are about uncleanness, not sin.
 - b) Mark/Jesus gets rid of category (Mark 7:19)
 - c) Paul, however, puts homosexuality as sin issue in Romans and 1 Cor.
 - d) But Paul actually condemning going against their nature (defines nature as what is natural/orientation), so given today’s situation, if Paul knew how people were naturally homosexual, he would not condemn it.
- Jesus never speaks of homosexuality

¹ One of the other debates with the word “nature” is if the word refers to cultural norms, not creation norms. Those favoring interpretations for homosexuality cite 1 Cor. 11:14, where “nature” seems to refer to a cultural norm of women having long hair. Those with the traditional view would note, however, that Paul is referring to something observed from nature- that baldness is more of a male phenomenon than a female phenomenon (based on secular writing of the day, and common observation even up to today). The rest of the text is hard to interpret and will not be interpreted here; the main point is to see that “nature” is not referring to a “cultural norm” in that passage.

Rebuttal/Traditional Interpretation

- It is debated that Jesus gets rid of the category in Mark 7. Other scholars note that Jesus may be saying that food is made clean as it comes out of the digestive tract. This would coincide with the understanding of the Pharisees- they had a law that stated excrement was actually not ritually impure.² Jesus would then be using some irony here- if the food is actually clean when it comes out, doesn't it make sense that it's not about food making us clean or unclean?
- Jesus upholds the ideal of monogamous, heterosexual marriage in Mark 10:1-12.
- Jesus condemns sexual immorality in Mark 7:21-23. Almost every first century Jew (including Jesus) would have Lev. 18 and 20 in mind.

On Monogamous Marriage

Given the creation ideal in Genesis 1-2, and Jesus' affirmation of that in places like Mark 10:1-12, there is a strong idea that marriage, not just sex, in the Bible is between man and woman.

² David Garland, *Mark NIV Application Bible Commentary*, p. 276.