

# OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS RELATING TO HOMOSEXUALITY: EXEGESIS AND REFLECTIONS

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October, 2002

The Old Testament says very little about homosexuality. In discussions on homosexuality there are three texts which are often cited: Lev. 18:22; Lev. 20:13, and Genesis 19:5-8. Some texts which are secondarily cited are Gen. 2 and Judges 19:22-26.

Lev. 18:22. *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is something abhorrent.*

Lev. 20:13. *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed something abhorrent; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.*

Gen. 19:5-8. Sodom and Gomorrah - see below.

## **A. THE CULTURAL (NOT NECESSARILY SPIRITUAL) VALUES OF ANCIENT ISRAEL**

### **I. Fertility**

One of the main principles underlying the sexuality laws is fertility. The ancient Hebrew understanding of conception was that a man “planted” the “seed” in the woman who was the “soil.” It was considered anti-fertility to plant the seed where it wouldn’t grow. (Thus Onan was struck down for letting his seed spill on the ground - Gen. 38:9-10.) A man’s procreation was the primary reason for polygamy - in case the first wife didn’t conceive or so a man could have more children. It was especially important that a man have sons.

So important was it for a man to have sons, that if a man died childless, provisions were made for his brother to impregnate the widow (presumably if she was still young enough) as a sort of a sperm donor for his brother - the levirate law. This provision is part of the biblical law code - Deut. 25:5-10. There are other laws pertaining to sexuality and marriage which we would clearly not accept as authoritative. Deut. 22:28-29 states that if a man is caught raping a virgin he has to marry her and pay her father 50 shekels.

There is a prophetic alternate voice to the pro-fertility bias of the culture. Isaiah 56:1-8 is a proclamation of radical inclusivity for the community of God - to include the foreigner and eunuch. “...do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says Adonai: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughter; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Isa 56:3b-5).

**Implications:** When we read these laws we need to consider that we no longer adhere to the cultural (not spiritual) value system which is the historical context for these laws - a value system which considered it essential that every man have sons (even if he needs more than one wife to accomplish this), that every woman produce sons for her husband, and that sons are more important than daughters. While we welcome the next generation, we do not believe that every person must have children to fulfill God's intention, nor do we believe (in principle, if not in practice) that childless persons are less whole than parents or that sons are superior to daughters.

## II. Maintaining Categories - Order (vs. Chaos?)

The biblical law codes which have been identified as "Priestly" ("P") show a great concern for maintaining the proper categories for things and people. Two aspects of this perspective are that a) things should remain in their pure form; and b) normal is good, abnormal is bad. The creation story in Genesis 1 uses these priestly categories where God separates things which are different - light from darkness, waters above from waters below; and God creates various species of plants and animals, each to its own kind. Finally, the holy is separated from the profane as God sanctifies the seventh day as a Sabbath.

The assumption that things should remain in their pure forms explains the prohibition against mixing different kinds of fabric in the same garment or mixing 2 types of seed in a field (Lev. 19:19). It explains the preference for unleavened bread - leaven perverts the bread from its pure form. The clean and the unclean must be kept separate - so a menstruating woman (unclean) stays separated from others. The holy and the secular must be kept separate - so only sanctified men (priests) may enter the sanctuary.

The emphasis on normalcy explains some of the food laws. You may eat only normal fish, i.e. fish with scales and fins; you may eat only normal birds, i.e. birds which fly (no ostrich). The emphasis on "normalcy" also means that a man with a physical disability is excluded from functioning in the priesthood (Lev. 21:16-23). The emphasis on "normalcy" may be an important aspect of the prohibition against male homosexual activity. Heterosexual activity is viewed as normal, homosexual activity as abnormal.

**Implications:** Unfortunately an emphasis on normalcy is an unspoken principle in the church today. Married people with children are seen as normal. Single people, childless people, and gay people are seen as abnormal and are often marginalized in our congregational life. We do not always welcome people with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities as full members of the community of Christ. We are often uncomfortable around people who look different or dress differently than the norm for our congregation.

## III. Honour and Shame

In an honour/shame society people get their sense of worth by being viewed as having honour or respectability in the eyes of society. "Ascribed honour" is bestowed upon a person either by birth (being born into an honourable family or village) or conferred by a superior (e.g. God or king). This is in contrast to 'acquired honour' which one gets by successfully competing for honour with

another. Honour is a sort of commodity. In some situations, you can acquire more honour by taking someone else's honour (through shaming them). One group may try to enhance its honour (status) by shaming a competing group. In an honour/shame culture men are generally regarded as having more honour than women. If a member of the group is dishonoured, the whole group is dishonoured, and especially the head of the group. When someone is dishonoured, the challenge of dishonour must be responded to and vindication achieved.

Ken Stone writes (*Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, Sheffield, 1996):

“Several anthropologists...have indicated that in those cultures manifesting the dynamics of honor and shame, male homosexuality is often viewed with particular distaste. This distaste is associated with the rigid differentiation between male and female gender roles, but also with the hierarchical nature of this differentiation. Masculinity is considered by many of the men of these cultures to be not only different from femininity, but also superior to it. Hence, it is nearly always considered an insult to say that a man is acting like a woman.

“Within this network of meaning, male homosexuality comes to assume a particular significance. Of the two men associated with any particular homosexual act, one of the men assumes a role that is, culturally speaking, allotted to the female alone. Stated another way, one male assumes the role of sexual object rather than of sexual subject, a role which is assumed to be ‘normal’ for the female but not for the male.... The male who allows himself to be (or is unable to prevent himself from being) *acted upon* sexually shows himself to be the object of another man; he therefore become ‘feminized’. This man is without honor because he is, so to speak, no longer considered a man. The negative attitude toward homosexuality can thus be seen within this ideological complex as a function of gender differentiation and hierarchy.” (p. 75-76, underlines added)

**Implications:** A concern for one's own “honour” in the eyes of others – how does that relate to the values which Christ taught? The valuing of males over females is a principle which is contrary to the Gospel's valuing of all persons. If the basis for the homosexuality laws in Leviticus is the assumption that it is treating a man like a woman and that necessarily debases him, it implies that heterosexual sex assumes the inferiority of the woman. (This type of thinking is not unusual today, especially among young males.) How does the idea of male as sexual subject and female as sexual object relate to our understanding of sexuality today?

## **B. THE BIBLICAL TEXTS:**

Lev. 18:22. *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is something abhorrent.*

Lev. 20:13. *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed something abhorrent; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.*

The prohibition of male homosexual acts is found only in the “Holiness Code.” This law code clearly regards such acts as completely unacceptable and, in ch. 20, worthy of the death penalty.

Question 1: Why are male homosexual acts prohibited but not lesbian activity?

- Fertility principle – the male seed is wasted by planting it where it won’t grow. Thus homosexuality activity is comparable to by implication to masturbation or birth control.
- Honour/shame principle - “Stated in terms of the subject-object distinction: according to the Levitical laws, a male subject should not treat another male as a sexual object. The latter position is allotted to the woman alone” (Stone, 78).
- Normalcy - It is not normal to treat a man like a sexual object (like a woman).

Question 2: What is meant by “*something abhorrent*”? (*to‘evah* - sometimes rendered “an abomination”)

What things are called abhorrent in the Old Testament? The most frequent references to something being abhorrent are worshipping idols or worshipping other gods. Also included are a wide range of things - some of which we will agree are wrong, and some things which we find acceptable: eating unclean animals (e.g. pork or seafood without fins and scales - Deut. 14:3), a woman wearing man’s clothes and a man wearing woman’s clothes (Deut. 24:4), a man remarrying his ex-wife if she’s been married and divorced in the meantime, casting any kind of image (Deut. 27:15 - a crucifix would qualify as “abhorrent”); false balances (Deut. 25:16), lying (Prov. 12:22), arrogance (Prov. 16:5); someone who ridicules others (Prov. 24:9), incense (Isa. 1:13 - when the people don’t also seek justice, rescue the oppressed, etc.), telling people what they want to hear for personal gain (Jer. 8:12).

### **Genesis 19:5-8. Sodom and Gomorrah**

The other commonly cited text in the homosexuality discussion is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. One interpretation is that God destroyed Sodom because its men engaged in homosexual acts. What does the text say?

Gen. 13:13 *Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against Adonai.*

Gen. 18:20 *Then Adonai said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.*

Note that the nature of S & G’s sin is not mentioned. At this point Abraham bargains with God not to destroy Sodom if there are enough righteous persons in it. Abraham gets God to agree to spare Sodom for the sake of 10 righteous - which apparently Sodom doesn’t have. Two “angels” come to Sodom and are invited by Lot (Abraham’s nephew) to spend the night at his house.

Gen. 19:4 *But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old,*

*all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; 5) and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." 6) Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him 7) and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. 8) Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof. 9) But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." [The "angels" aid in keeping the mob at bay and tell Lot,] 13) "For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before Adonai, and Adonai has sent us to destroy it."*

Question 1: Why do the men want to rape the visitors? Are they gay?

No. They want to take the honour of the visitors by humiliating them. "Within a culture marked by rigid gender differentiation and hierarchy, a man who assumes the role allotted by convention to a woman is moving, socially *downward*. If this role is forced upon him by another male, as is the case in homosexual rape, then the effect is both a challenge to his masculinity and a challenge to his honor" (Stone, 79). "Rape is a crime of violence, not of passion, and the men of Gibeah want to humiliate the Levite in the most degrading way, by forcing him into a passive role, into the woman's position." [J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests are Being Served? (p.85) in *Judges and Method*, pp. 65-90.]

Question 2: Why did Lot offer his daughters instead?

The rape of Lot's daughters would have also been regarded as an evil (see Judges 19). The honour/shame principle would mean that Lot would be dishonoured if anyone in his household, including guests, were dishonoured. Since the daughters, as female, would have less honour to begin with, perhaps less honour would be lost. The normalcy principle might suggest that Lot regarded the treated of women as sexual objects as more "normal" than treating a man as such.

Question 3: Why did God destroy Sodom?

Genesis doesn't specify.

Eze.16:49-50 *This was the guilt of your (Jerusalem's) sister Sodom: she and her daughters (outlying villages or suburbs) had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abhorrent things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it.*

Isa. 1:10 speaks of Jerusalem as being like Sodom and Gomorrah. The sins of Jerusalem (which make it like Sodom) implicitly include failure to seek justice and defend the powerless (vs. 16).

**Comments:** The assumption in identifying this text with homosexuality seems to be that the behaviour of the mob in demanding to rape the male visitors is indicative of widespread homosexual practices in Sodom which had been going on for some time – thus God’s decision to destroy the city. There is a disturbing implication to this interpretation. A mob wants to gang-rape some visitors to the town. By identifying the evil in the situation as homosexuality, the implication is made that had they raped Lot’s daughters instead it would not have been evil. If homosexual rape is evil primarily because it is homosexual, then by implication heterosexual rape is not evil, or is somehow at least normal. Does Lot’s gesture of offering his daughters to the rape mob suggest the Lot himself regards the heterosexual rape of his own daughters as somehow more acceptable than the rape of his male guests? Yes - but not because it is heterosexual - rather because the girls are less valued than the men and it seems more normal to treat women as sexual objects (p.80, Stone)

### **Genesis 2: a brief reflection.**

The description of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 2 does presuppose hetero-sexuality as the norm, but in other ways it flies in the face of the cultural presuppositions of ancient Israel.

1. Women had lower status in society in ancient Israel. However Genesis 2 depicts of the man and woman as being of one flesh, and the women being called the helper who is *neqed* - the man’s counterpart (in contrast to the animal helpers and God the divine helper). The woman is portrayed as man’s equal in God’s original creation - before sin disrupts their mutuality.
2. While polygamy was considered acceptable and not unusual in ancient Israel, Genesis 2 says a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife. This *may* be interpreted as implying a man would have only one wife.
3. The primary motivation for polygamy was to enable a man to have many sons. If a first wife did not produce children, a man would take a second wife. Genesis 2 *radically* departs from the common culture of ancient Israel insofar as the purpose of the man and woman’s relationality is not portrayed as primarily to produce children. The man needs the woman, not to produce sons, but because he is lonely and needs a suitable companion. The purpose of their relationship is the relationship itself, not fertility.

**Implications:** One of the arguments made for homosexuality being outside of God’s intention for human relationships is that it is not a sexual relationship which can produce children. Gen. 2 departs from it’s culture’s assumptions in suggesting that the original and primary purpose of intimate relationship is mutual help and companionship. Gay couples tell us that they are persons for whom this bond is found with same-sex partners.