



## A Question of Interpretation

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*Both read the Bible day & night,  
But thou read'st black where I read white.*  
William Blake

### *Background and Disclaimer*

The Bible has been used to dictate behaviour and social/cultural practice in a wide variety of areas from piety to diet to sexuality.<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus are full of regulations concerning appropriate eating habits, business dealings, sexual practices and other functions of individuals within community. Fasting and celibacy are well-known tenets of Christian monasticism. Until recently, “Fish Fridays” were common among Catholic and Orthodox congregations, and no meat was eaten during the Lenten season.<sup>2</sup> Also until very recently, Christian churches of all persuasions condemned sex outside the recognized boundaries of sanctioned marriage (i.e. between a man and a woman). In this article I will examine some ways in which the Bible has been used for ideological ends in relation to sex, particularly the issue of homosexuality.

I am a Christian and the product of a rather traditional and conventional upbringing. My father is an ‘apostolic’ evangelical minister of a small congregation which believes the Bible to be inerrant and literal, and still employs and refers to the old Greek New Testament. My mother taught Sunday School and was president of the local “Women’s World Day of Prayer.” Both parents graduated from Bible College. We attended church



every Sunday morning, as well as weeknight Bible studies and prayer meetings. After completing my bachelor's degree at a small Christian college, I joined an inner-city multi-denominational church. Over the years of reading, hearing, and being taught the Bible, I have been exposed to a number of ideas about and interpretations of Scripture. Verses and passages have been used to justify any number of opinions, bolster a wide array of arguments, and support or condemn both personal and social actions. Much has been written in recent months both for and against the acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and intersexual people into the Church. The recent developments within various mainline Protestant denominations, especially the Anglican and Uniting Churches, concerning the ordination of openly gay clergy are changing the landscape of the debate.<sup>3</sup>

### *Sinful Abomination or Appropriate Expression: Homosexuality and the Christian*

Many of the arguments concerning (especially those against) homosexuality begin with the Biblical creation narrative. "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," has become a cliché. Even though homosexuality is not mentioned, or even alluded to, in the first three chapters of Genesis, John White claims that God's creation of 'male and female' (Genesis 1:27) indicates God never intended for two males or two females to have a sexual relationship.<sup>4</sup>

God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28) unambiguously refers to procreation, which is possible only through heterosexual sex.



Howard Eilberg-Schwartz argues that Levitical laws should be read in light of Genesis 1.<sup>5</sup>

The orderliness and procreative nature of creation obligated human beings to act in a manner that sustained order and procreativity.... The purpose of sexual distinction, therefore, is procreation – the maintenance of the specie over time. Even the terminology for the homosexual act, ‘lying with a male as one lies with a woman,’ reflects this understanding that sex is intended to be between a male and a female.

The Bible actually comments on or openly refers to homosexuality only seven times. In Genesis 19:1-11, we read of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When two strangers (angels) visit Lot’s house, the town’s men demand that they be handed over. “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so we can have sex with them.” (Genesis 19:5) “Don’t do this wicked thing,” Lot pleads with them in verse seven, then offers them his own daughters! Some commentators have used this situation to argue that God destroyed the cities because of homosexuality.

There is another Old Testament story which strangely echoes the one of Lot. Judges chapters nineteen and twenty tell of a Levite man who was travelling through inhospitable land. While sheltering for the night at the home of an elderly man in Gibeah, some of the local men surround the house: “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.” (Judges 19:22) The old man offers them his daughter instead, whom they refuse. The traveller gives them his concubine, whom they proceed to abuse and rape to



death. White refers to this instance as suggesting that homosexual practice is not only sinful but also unnatural or perverted.<sup>6</sup>

Any argument against homosexuality based on this very bizarre tale seems to gloss over the gruesome aspects of the rest of the story. The traveller chops up the dead woman and sends her pieces to the twelve tribes of Israel. When recounting his ordeal he does not mention that the townsmen wanted sex with him – they intended to kill him, he says. (Judges 20:5) He also does not reveal that he sent the woman out to be raped. He dismembered her body “because they committed this lewd and disgraceful act.” (Judges 20:6) To which act was he referring? The rape? The woman’s murder? The breaking of hospitality rules and conventions?<sup>7</sup>

I find it shocking that Lot offered his virgin daughters to the men of Sodom. It is incomprehensible that the Gibeahite man would have offered his daughter to the townsmen and that the Levite *did* give his concubine to be raped. To even contemplate that the Bible could be condemning homosexuality here while completely ignoring the plight of women in these stories seems to me contrary to the overall message of the Bible. Choon-Leong Seow maintains that these narratives are “about wickedness in general, violence, and the violation of a sacrosanct code of hospitality. Gang rape is at issue ... not same-sex love.”<sup>8</sup> Daniel Helminiak also declares that the sin of Sodom (and by extension, of Gibeah) was “abuse and offense against strangers. Insult to the traveller. Inhospitality to the needy. That is the point of the story understood in its own historical context.”<sup>9</sup> He cites the prophet Ezekiel as proof: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant,



overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things.” (Ezekiel 16:49-50a) There is no mention of homosexuality.

In Leviticus we have the clearest prohibitions against sex between men. “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable [*to’eba*].” (Leviticus 18:22) “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable [*to’eba*].” (Leviticus 20:13) The King James, or Authorized, Version (KJV) renders the Hebrew word *to’eba* as ‘abomination.’ There can be no doubt in terms of what these verses say: same-sex intercourse between males is forbidden. For many Christians, it is as simple as that – if the Bible says homosexual acts are prohibited, then homosexuality must be wrong, a sin. However, as Seow points out, *to’eba* is widely used throughout the Old Testament to describe anything unacceptable in the Israelite faith and culture.<sup>10</sup> This included unclean food, idolatry and occult practices, the remarriage of divorced women and many other instances of improper or inappropriate behaviour. Therein lies the problem. Why should one stipulation be considered or upheld today while another is not? “Why should this prohibition (against male-male homoerotic acts) be applicable but not others in the same Holiness Code, like the crossbreeding of animals, the mixing of grain or fiber, various dietary regulations, and so forth?” Seow rightly asks.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, female homosexuality is not mentioned or even acknowledged in Leviticus. One could deduce, therefore, that only male homosexuality is prohibited – or that only male homosexuality is wrong. Such a view seems



very inconsistent with the ostensible intention of Biblical commands against sin.

In the New Testament we find a more inclusive statement. Though not a prohibition, it is an obviously negative portrayal of sexual behaviour or 'shameful lusts'.

God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.... Even women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men. (Romans 1:24-27)

It would appear that lesbians are finally included in this description of improper sexual relationships. The phrase "in the same way" links the two verses and sets up a parallel between what women did and what men did. However, verse 27 is more explicit in describing men having sex with other men, while verse 26 only states that women were doing something 'unnatural'. Helminiak claims that this could refer to some kind of socially taboo practices, or perhaps non-procreative acts.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation seems both reasonable and plausible. If that is the case, Paul was not referring to same-sex acts between women. The meaning and the intent of the passage are both unclear and highly contested.

Helminiak argues that the words in the original text necessitate a different reading for this passage. He claims that the Greek words translated as 'unnatural' (*para physin*) mean a variety of things, including 'peculiar,'



'against character,' 'out of the ordinary' and 'unusual'.<sup>13</sup> "There is no sense whatever in those words that the practices were wrong or against God or contrary to the divine order of creation or in conflict with the universal nature of things."<sup>14</sup> This may be a compelling and possibly attractive argument, yet it ignores the context of the entire passage which clearly does not approve of these *para physin* acts.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians lists "the wicked" who "will not inherit the kingdom of God." (I Corinthians 6:9) This includes "male prostitutes" and "homosexual offenders." The original Greek words are *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, which are difficult to translate properly. Helminiak points out that the 1952 Revised Standard Version (RSV) consolidates these two words into one: homosexuals. The 1977 RSV edition interprets them as 'sexual perverts,' while the New American Bible (NAB) says 'practicing homosexuals.' The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of 1989 translates the words separately as 'male prostitutes' and 'sodomites'.<sup>15</sup> Helminiak's conclusion is simple: "nobody really knows what these words mean, so to use them to condemn homosexuals is dishonest and unfair."<sup>16</sup> This assumption may be too simplistic, but the point remains that there really is no certainty about what these words denote or suggest.<sup>17</sup>

Another Pauline epistle used in the argument against male same-sex relationships is the First Letter to Timothy. What the NRSV translates as 'sodomites' the NIV renders as 'perverts'. (I Timothy 1:10) However, the original word here is *arsenokoitai*. If the same word can be translated differently within the same version of the Bible it becomes quickly apparent that translation and interpretation are more akin to deciphering and



decoding. The meaning and implication of the term 'pervert' is quite different than that of 'sodomite' or 'homosexual.' This throws into question much of the case against homosexuality based on First Corinthians and First Timothy.

On the plus side of the equation, the Bible includes several stories of intense relationships between members of the same sex. Two of the most famous instances are the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, and the friendship between David and Jonathan. These are often used in gay-positive quarters (such as Metropolitan Community Church) as examples of gay love. But even in heterosexual marriages, Ruth's vow of loyalty is often read and regarded as the ideal of romantic love between husband and wife.

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16b-17)

An even stronger case can be made with the narrative found in First and Second Samuel. We read that "Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself." (I Samuel 18:1b) This is a very powerful statement and has its echoes in another passage often quoted in marriage ceremonies: "[A] man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one." (Genesis 2:24) When Jonathan is killed in battle David laments bitterly: "Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." (II Samuel 1:26b)



Though neither pair is explicitly depicted as sexually intimate, it is important to note that the authors of both texts do not condemn the emotional attachments expressed by members of the same sex. Their friendships may have been extraordinary but they are presented as positive and acceptable.

There are several New Testament passages which can be used to argue that Christ's redemptive work not only includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and intersexual people, but also validates homosexuals as full communing members of the Church, Christ's body. Two of these are Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16, and Paul's statement of equality in Galatians. In the Acts story, after being offered a sheet containing all sorts of animals to eat, Peter says that he has "never eaten anything impure or unclean." (Acts 10:14) A voice from heaven replies: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." (Acts 10:15) Peter interprets this as incorporating gentiles in the message of the gospel. But in light of the Galatians verse, the vision becomes even more significant and inclusive. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) This seems the most convincing argument. Jesus has broken down ethnic, socio-economic, and sexual/gender barriers. If one believes and follows Christ there is no condemnation. Gay people have the same access to God's grace, salvation and eternal life as anyone else. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31b-32)

### *Some Thoughts in Closing*

It is my belief that a literal approach to reading the Bible is not only impossible but also inconsistent. Fundamentalists, literalists and other



conservative Christians still make the claim that they do not interpret scripture but merely take it for what it obviously says. They believe that the words in whichever Biblical translation they happen to prefer mean exactly what they mean today. They develop theologies and ideologies, make decisions and pass judgment based on their modern versions of the Bible. They take for granted the teachings passed on to them by religious teachers and preachers. Scripture itself, however, begs to be weighed, tested, prodded and probed for the truth. "Test everything. Hold on to the good," exhorts one of the epistle writers. (I Thessalonians 5:21) Biblical exposition requires active involvement and serious study. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you," Jesus told the crowds on a mountainside over two millennia ago. (Matthew 7:7)

This article has attempted a brief survey of scriptural interpretation dealing with homosexuality and/in the Bible. However, it is somewhat difficult to adequately or comprehensively address all questions and investigate each issue raised by these arguments in anything less than a book-length tome. I do not claim impartiality, nor can I pretend to complete detachment from the topic. I do contend, however, that everyone involved in this discussion is biased. All the authors, pundits, clerics and commentators participating in the current debate on homosexuality in the clergy or "gay marriage," for example, are implicated in some way. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to illustrate in even a small way the complexities of using the Bible to condemn or justify one's beliefs and behaviours.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I refer to the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), as published by Charles Ryrie (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Among traditional Greek Orthodox, Lent begins with 'Clean Monday' (also known as 'Green Monday') during which people eat all manner of vegetarian dishes – it is considered a form of purification.

<sup>3</sup> In America the Baptists have already split into two factions and similar schisms are threatened among Presbyterians.

<sup>4</sup> This is the central argument in "Two halves do not make one whole," White's chapter on homosexuality in *Eros Defiled* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *History of Religion* (1987). Cited by Richard Whitaker in "Creation and Human Sexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, Choon-Leong Seow, ed. (pp. 6-7).

<sup>6</sup> White, p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> One of my professors admitted that she found Judges 19 "very weird." She maintained that like quite a bit of the Old Testament, there is a point to the story which she does not understand because we are too remote from it. She argued that we should consider the rhetorical meaning of the text rather than take on the very contemporary approach of "photographing historical events." My question remains, what is the rhetorical meaning and how can we access it?

<sup>8</sup> Choon-Leong Seow, "A Heterotextual Perspective," *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Seow, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Seow, p. 15. For related discussion see Elaine J. Ramshaw's "Sexuality is: (a) deeply problematic, (b) God's gift, (c) a hoot," in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30.1 (Feb. 2003): pp. 20-30. She argues that the Holiness Code was concerned with cultural, as well as individual, purity. Not only intended to keep the Israelites free from disease, these regulations were ways of defining Jewish ethnic and religious identity as distinct from the peoples around them.

<sup>12</sup> Helminiak, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Helminiak, pp. 63-65.

<sup>14</sup> Helminiak, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Helminiak, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Helminiak, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> A form of *malakoi* is still in use today. The singular is *malakos*, which is just the masculine form of the word 'soft.' It is sometimes used in a pejorative way, much like in English ("He's soft," or "He's a softy"). Another form is the term *malakas*, which is derogatory slang for gay, or male homosexual.