

## The Bible, Christianity, and the LGBTQ Community

### Looking at the Bible

There are six Bible accounts that some use in reference to homosexuality. These include:

Genesis 19:1-9	(Sodom Account)
1 Timothy 1:10	(Letter of Paul)
1 Corinthians 6:9	(Letter of Paul)
Romans 1: 24-27	(Letter of Paul)
Genesis 1-2	(Creation Account)
Leviticus 18:22, 20:13	(Holiness Code)

### The Sodom Account (Genesis 19:1-9)

The story of Sodom is an appropriate text to begin with, as it has taken a central role in the study of homosexuality. We must understand the context of this account. God, according to this story, sent two angels to warn Abraham's nephew, Lot, about the approaching destruction of Sodom. Let us stop here for a moment. Even before sending the angels, God intended, according to this story, to destroy Sodom. Whatever the reason for the city's destruction it had to do with the sin of Sodom before this event. The story continues: The angels came to the city of Sodom and Lot welcomed them to his home and prepared a meal for them. Then a grouping of men surrounded the house and asked where the angels who had come to the house were. They basically shouted, "Where are those men who came to your house? We want to have sex with them!" Lot refuses but offers his daughters instead, giving the reason: "Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. Don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof" (19:8). The crowd of men insisted on what they wanted and tried to break through the door. The angels ended up pulling Lot into the house and blinding the crowd.

First of all, in interpreting this event we must take into account the entire situation. Whatever is happening here it is a form of rape. The crowd of men wished to sexually assault the angels. The situation is also sewn through with appalling violence. Many assert that Lot's offer of his daughters instead of the male angels implies that homosexual sex would have been worse than heterosexual sex, but Lot himself gives his reason for his action: "Don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." In our time, this does not make entire sense, but in Lot's time, hospitality was a nearly sacred concept, and it is that distinction that Lot expresses: the visitors are his guests. Nonetheless, if we were to accept that the distinction is gender-based, we could only conclude homosexual rape of angels is worse than heterosexual rape. To use this story to condemn all homosexual behavior is unfounded and truly stretching this story outside of its historical framework, but that is exactly what has happened. As Jeffrey S. Silker, in reference to such distortion of this text, wrote in his article in Theology Today, "David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba does not make all heterosexual expressions sinful!"

An interesting (dis)connection to this story:

In the 1508 Wycliffe translation of the Bible into Middle English, the Greek word arsenokoitai (arsenokoitai) in 1 Corinthians 6:9 was translated “synn of Sodom.” Wyclif’s own interpretation was that arsenokoitai had something to do with the Sodom story, though nothing is implied as such in the New Testament text. The author could very well have written “sin of Sodom” if he had wanted to. If your Bible translation has “sodomites” on that list in 1 Corinthians 6:9 it is because of Wyclif. We will look more closely at the word arsenokoitai below in our study of the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy texts; however, it is remarkable to see how the story of Sodom, filled with rape and violence, has taken such a central role surrounding the topic of homosexuality and more precisely in the development of the word “sodomite” as what it means today.

***Important Term:***

Arsenokoitai (arsenokoitai): This Greek noun is formed from the joining together of the Greek adjectival prefix for male (arseno-) and beds (koitai). Literally then it would mean, “male beds.” It is found in 1 Timothy 1:10 and 1 Corinthians 6:9. This is the first appearance of the word in preserved Greek literature and outside of these two verses this word does not appear in the New Testament. The Greek word arsenokoitai is mentioned in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 and its meaning is debated. Because of the obscurity of this word and the lack of outside sources to shed light on its meaning, we must derive its meaning from the text.

***Important Term:***

Homosexual: The English word homosexual is a compound word made from the Greek word homo, meaning “the same”, and the Latin term sexualis, meaning sex. The term “homosexual” is of modern origin, and it wasn’t until about a hundred years ago that it was first used. There is no word in biblical Greek or Hebrew that is equivalent to the English word homosexual. The 1946 Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible was the first translation to use the word homosexual.

***Important Term:***

Sodomite: There is no word in biblical Greek or Hebrew for “sodomy.” A Sodomite was simply an inhabitant of Sodom, just as a Moabite was an inhabitant of Moab. Any translation of the New Testament making use of the words “sodomy” or “sodomite” are clear interpretations and not faithful translations.

**Letters of Paul-1 Timothy 1:8-10**

“Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine...” (RSV)

Let us keep in mind that the word translated sodomites is the Greek word arsenokoitai. Our question right now should be, “What is this talking about?” In order to answer this question, we will begin by breaking up the phrase into its structural pairs. You will see these groupings reflected below in the English as well as the Greek. (The New Testament, by the way, was originally written in Greek)

1 Timothy 1:9-10 (ENGLISH, RSV)

A:	Lawless and disobedient
B:	Ungodly and sinners
C:	Unholy and profane
D:	Murders of fathers / murders of mothers / manslaughter
E:	Immoral persons / sodomites / kidnappers
F:	Liars / perjurers / and whatever else

As we see in the English there seems to be a relationship between the words in each rows A, B, C, D, and F. What about row E, though? What do “immoral persons, sodomites, and kidnappers” have in common? To answer this question we will need to explore the Greek. The three Greek words present in line E are: pornoi (pornoiv), arsenokoitai (arsenokoitaiV), and andrapodistai (andrapodistaiV).

Some commonly read Bible translations include King James Version (KJV), New International Version (NIV), New King James (NKJ), Revised Standard Version (RSV), and New English Bible (NEB). These words were, respectively, translated in the following manner:

	pornoι	arsenokoitai	andrapodistai
	Whoremonger	Them that defile themselves with mankind	Men-stealers
NIV:	Adulterers	Perverts	Slave traders
NKJ:	Fornicators	Sodomites	Kidnappers
RSV:	Immoral persons	Sodomites	Kidnappers
NEB	Fornicators	Sodomites	Kidnappers

Pornos derives from the verb pernemi meaning “to sell” and the following three definitions are given:

- a male who prostitutes his body to another’s lust for hire
- a male prostitute
- a male who indulges in unlawful sexual intercourse, a fornicator

Andrapodistes, the stem of the word Andrapodistai, the third word, returns the following definitions:

- slave-dealer, kidnapper, man-stealer
- of one who unjustly reduces free males to slavery
- of one who steals the slaves of others and sells them.

Arsenokoitai, as previously indicated, is made up of the Greek words for male (arseno-) and beds (koitai). In Greek, the word koitai, literally meaning beds, is commonly used as a euphemism for one who has sex. Arseno- is an adjectival prefix, thus literally we could translate this as “male bedder.”

We should now be able to derive an exact understanding of the word arsenokoitai based on the two words that surround it. We have, first of all, the enslaved male prostitute, the “male-bedder”

(arsenokoitai), and the slave dealer. The New American Bible offers a footnote that might shed some light on the historical context of the time:

“The Greek word translated as boy prostitutes may refer to catamites, i.e. boys or young men who were kept for the purposes of prostitution, a practice not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world. In Greek mythology this was the function of Ganymede, the “cupbearer of the gods,” whose Latin name was Catamus...” (NAB)

There was a common practice in which men of Paul’s time would have slave “pet” boys whom they sexually exploited. These boys were prepubescent and without beards so they seemed like females. Today, this practice is referred to as pederasty. Regardless, however, the pornos is clearly a prostitute.

Keeping this in mind, let’s look back at what we have so far: the enslaved male prostitute, the “male-bedder” (arsenokoitai), and the slave dealer. This contextual dynamic leads one to understand arsenokoitai as being the one who sleeps with the prostitute, the man who literally lies on the bed with him. It is as if Paul were saying, “male prostitutes, men who sleep with them, and slave dealers who procure them...” Not only does the syntactical and historical context point to this understanding, but also the very literal sense of the word arsenokoitai itself.

If this translation of arsenokoitai is correct, it should also make logical sense where it is also used in 1 Corinthians 6:9, either confirming or refuting our understanding of this word.

**Letters of Paul-1 Corinthians 6:9-10**

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.” (RSV)

The term translated “sexual perverts” in RSV is actually two different words. The first word is malakos, which is the singular form of the word malakoi, and the second term is arsenokoitai.

Some commonly read translations include...

	<i>malakos</i>	<i>arsenokoitai</i>
KJV:	effeminate	abusers of themselves with mankind
NIV:	male prostitutes	homosexual offenders
NKJ:	homosexuals	sodomites
RSV <sup>1952</sup> :	homosexuals	
RSV <sup>1977</sup> :	sexual perverts	
RSV <sup>1989</sup> :	male prostitutes	sodomites
Jerusalem Bible:	catamites	sodomites

The term malakoi, as an adjective, literally means “soft.” In Matthew 11:8 it has been used as an adjective in reference to clothing. In this text, however, it is used as a noun and its meaning is debated. Does our understanding of arsenokoitai as revealed in 1 Timothy 1:10 as “men who sleep with male-prostitutes” make sense next to this word malakos which is translated by both NIV and RSV as male

prostitutes? The Jerusalem Bible even translates the term malakos as catamites, those young softprepubescent “pet” boys mentioned earlier. The syntactical and historical context of 1 Timothy 1:10 reveals the meaning of the word arsenokoitai as men who sleep with prostitutes, and the fact this also fits the context of 1 Corinthians 6:9 seems to confirm that we have found the meaning of these obscure words. It makes perfect sense that Paul would rebuke not only the prostitute, but also the “male-bedder” or the man who sleeps with that prostitute.

As we see, these two verses are about this practice of prostitution and possibly pederasty, but what about Romans 1:27. It clearly says, “...and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” Isn’t this clear enough? There are no obscure Greek words. How are we to understand this?

### **Letters of Paul-Romans 1:24-27**

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural,

27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (RSV)

To understand what Paul is writing about we must look at the event as a whole and not isolate a single portion of it. Each verse in this story gives us a glimpse into the situation.

- Verse 24: “Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity.” If we are painting a picture, it begins with the image of LUST.
- Verse 25: “...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” Now there is a FALSEHOOD as well as IDOLATRY involved (i.e. worshipping something other than God).
- Verse 26: “God gave them up to dishonorable passions...” Now DISHONORABLE PASSIONS are presented. Looking back at this now we see this as a situation of lust, falsehood, idolatry, and dishonorable passions.
- Verse 26 and 27 continue: “Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another...”

Looking at the men first will help to clarify the passage: “The men likewise gave up natural relations with women...” Stop. Did you see that? They gave up natural relations with women, which implies that these men were heterosexuals by nature. The phrase translated as “gave up” is the Greek word *aphente* (*afenteV*) meaning to leave behind, forsake, neglect, or divorce. These men, therefore, divorced themselves from their own nature, that of heterosexuality, and were consumed with passion for one another. Women did likewise. As we see, Paul is talking about heterosexual individuals engaging in homosexual sex, which is contrary to their nature.

Why would men do that? As any biblical scholar will tell you: "Context is everything." This is a situation of lust, falsehood, idolatry, and dishonorable passions. In this account there are a number of men and a number of women, both plurals. This would most definitely be an orgy...everyone filled with lust and "dishonorable passions" having sex with whomever however. But why would Paul be talking about orgies? A little research uncovers the pagan practice of "sacred sexual orgies." Baal was the Canaanite deity that was worshipped with sexual orgies on Mount Peor in Moab, with which Paul would have been familiar. With this contextual understanding let us read this story again:

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

Anyone who isolates the phrase "natural relations" to declare homosexual relations unnatural is interjecting their own prejudice and reading entirely outside of context. Even if we were to isolate that phrase it could only be used to condemn heterosexuals who go against their own heterosexual nature and engage in homosexual activity. As Peter J. Gomes, preacher to Harvard University, further clarifies in his book *The Good Book*, "It is not clear that Saint Paul distinguished, as we must, between homosexual persons and heterosexual persons who behave like homosexuals, but what is clear is that what is 'unnatural' is the one behaving after the manner of the other" (page 157).

So far we have looked at all three of the New Testament scriptures used in reference to homosexuality as well as the Genesis narrative about Sodom. That leaves us with two other scriptures that are mentioned when this topic is brought up: The Creation Narrative (Genesis 1-2) and Leviticus 18:22 (& parallel verse 20:13).

### **The Creation Narrative-Genesis 1-2**

This is a story about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!! We've all probably heard that somewhere. The fact is, it was Adam and Eve. In *The Good Book*, Gomes writes the following pertaining to the creation narrative:

"...the authors of Genesis were intent upon answering the question 'Where do we come from?' Then, as now, the only plausible answer is from the union of a man and a woman...The creation story in Genesis does not pretend to be a history of anthropology or of every social relationship. It does not mention friendship, for example, and yet we do not assume that friendship is condemned or abnormal. It does not mention the single state, and yet we know that singleness is not condemned, and that in certain religious circumstances it is held in very high esteem" (pages 49-50).<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Adam and Eve is the only relationship for this specific account that makes sense. It is a story about creation, and only a procreative (i.e. hetero-sexual) relationship would be appropriate for this particular story. If someone, in spite of this, were to base his or her opinion of homosexuality on the Creation story alone, their stance would not only be out of context, but also based on a weak argument.

That leaves us with two Leviticus laws: Leviticus 18:22 & parallel verse 20:13.

## Holiness Code-Leviticus 18:22

Let us look at a few different translations of Leviticus 18:22...

- KJV: "Thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination."
- NIV: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable."

Living Bible: "Homosexuality is absolutely forbidden, for it is an enormous sin."

The questions we should ask are, "What does this really say, and what is the context of this law?" Leviticus is the book of the law. It contains everything from commandments for men not to shave the edges of their beards; orders not to have intercourse during menstruation; not to harvest different crops in the same field; as well as strict dietary laws. The Holiness Code, as it is called, was written to distinguish the Hebrews, morally and ritually, from the Babylonians and Canaanites. They are often referred to as the purity laws. Now let us look at what the New Testament says about the law:

"Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (RSV Romans 7:4-6).

"Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian [i.e. The Law]. For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith" (RSV Galatians 3:23-26).

Other New Testament Scriptures on the Law include: 2 Corinthians 3:6; Colossians 2:13-15; Hebrews 8:8-13, Romans 10:1-4.

If we are "not under the law" does that mean we can lie, cheat, steal, etc.? In Romans 6:15 Paul answers this question himself, "By no means!" Didn't Christ himself in Matthew 5:17 say that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it? So what is the law? Jesus was once asked, "Rabbi, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (RSV Matthew 22:36-40)

Paul would later echo this idea in Romans as he wrote

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." (RSV Romans 13:8-10)

Christian tradition has distinguished Old Testament laws that pertain to “purity” and those that pertain to “morality,” the latter of which still apply. If love is the true fulfillment of the law, then for Christians should not love be the measuring stick for determining by which laws we are to abide (i.e. which are “moral laws”)?

Now let’s look back at the verse. Literally translated from Hebrew Leviticus 18:22 reads: “And with a male you shall not lay lyings of a woman.”

First of all “lay lyings” has no clear interpretation. The only way of making sense of this is to insert something to produce a smoother, more commonsense English translation. For example, one can insert “as the” or “in the” after the first lay as showed below:

- “And with a male you shall not lay [as the] lyings of a woman.”
- “And with a male you shall not lay [in the] lyings of a woman.”

Even if we accept the NIV or KJV translations, (KJV: “Thou shalt not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.”) we still must understand the historical context of how a man laid with a women, for this is the qualifier of the phrase. Rabbi Arthur Waskow explains, “The whole structure of sexuality in the Torah assumes a dominant male and a subordinate female.”<sup>2</sup> The status of women in that time was much lower than that of men, and women were even considered property of the men. This belief regarding gender relations is rejected by most of the Christian church today, but in order to make sense of this specific Jewish law we must keep in mind this context in which it was written. We simply cannot ignore the second half of the phrase, “as with a woman” as most interpretations tend to do.

For one of the men in the sexual encounter to be treated as one would treat a woman, the man would have been taking a lower status. To do so would have been reducing him to property and in effect defiling the image of God, which man was considered. To fully understand this law, we must consider the historical context in which it was written.

The Old Testament was initially a part of the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jewish people.

The Septuagint was an ancient translation of the Old Testament from its original Hebrew into Greek. It was the “version” of the Old Testament that the New Testament writers quoted from when they cited Old Testament scriptures. The Hebrew word in this specific law we are looking at that was translated into English as “abomination” was translated in the Septuagint into the Greek word *bdelugma*. A quick search through a lexicon for the word *bdelugma* brings up the following definition:

- a foul thing, a detestable thing
- of idols and things pertaining to idolatry

This seems to point to the idea that this specific law has more to do with a matter of ritual purity and with the Hebrews not being like the idolatrous Babylonians or Canaanites. As we see, this law isn’t as simple as it appears. First of all we have a very unclear law (“And with a male you shall not lay lyings of a woman.”). Second of all, we must consider the historical context of how men treated women in sexual encounters. Thirdly, as revealed through Christ, the fulfillment of the law is truly love. Rape, stealing, hating, etc. are immoral because they are not in line with the Law of Love, which Christ frames so perfectly when questioned about the law. Is a committed homosexual relationship in violation of this law? We could become like the Pharisees and Sadducees trying to pick apart this law forever, but if we



look closely, Christ's life truly reveals the Spirit of the Law. Surely this is what Paul meant when he wrote, "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (RSV Romans 7:4-6).

**\*All Materials taken from *gaychurch.org*. This website provides education and resources about the Bible, for individuals seeking an Open and Affirming church, a bookstore for more resources, and great talking points when dealing with someone who may have a differing interpretation than yours.\***