

An Examination of Recent Interpretations of What the Bible Says about Homosexuality

In 1955 D. Sherwin Bailey wrote a book entitled Homosexuality and the Western Tradition. That book has had a large impact on the discussion of this subject in the Christian community, and his arguments have been repeated and refined by many others. Bailey and his followers have challenged the centuries old Christian tradition that homosexual behavior was wrong.

The challenge should be welcomed. Christians should respond with enthusiasm whenever anyone asks them to re-examine what the Bible teaches. Cultural traditions have been read into the Bible. Could it be the case that Christians have done the same with their understanding of homosexual activity?

Traditionally Christians have understood the sin of Sodom in Genesis 19 to be homosexual behavior.

Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom--both young and old--surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." (Gen. 19:4-5)

Bailey and those who follow his reasoning point out that a literal translation of verse 5 would read "Bring them out to us so that we can know them." What does *know* mean in this sentence? It has traditionally been understood as sexual intercourse. But the verb is used 943 times in the Old Testament, and only 17 times does it refer to sexual intercourse.

Perhaps here the verb means "to get acquainted with." Westerners think of getting to know someone as a light and informal matter, but in the Eastern world the rituals of hospitality carry more weight. The sin of Sodom, therefore, could very well be a breach of Eastern customs of hospitality. Such an interpretation sounds plausible.

There is one major flaw to it, however. One of the fundamental rules of interpreting literature is that the meaning of a word is determined by its context. Are there any clues given in the context to tell us what *know* means in verse 5? The word is also found in verse 8.

Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. 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. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." (Gen. 19:6-8).

The New International Version translates *know* in verse 8 as "slept with a man." "Look," Lot says, "I have two daughters who have never known a man." In that verse the word *know* does not mean "to get acquainted with." All interpreters understand it to mean sexual intercourse. And if that is what the word means in verse 8, then the word should be interpreted to mean the same thing in verse 5. The new interpretation of the passage does not hold up under investigation.

Homosexual behavior was certainly not the only sin of Sodom (see Jer. 23:14; Ezek. 16:49). But some interpreters have so emphasized the other aspects of Sodom's sin that they have, in effect, said that the homosexual aspect is insignificant. Jewish writers, however, did not ignore the sexual element. Both Philo (*Life of Abraham* 133-41) and Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 1.194-95, 200-201), two of the most prominent Jewish writers of the first century A.D., interpreted the Old Testament account of Sodom as referring directly to homosexual acts. The New Testament book of Jude also recognizes the sexual aspect of Sodom's sin. Jude writes, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion" (Jude 7).

The precise sexual sin of Sodom was homosexual rape. Someone may say, therefore, that this passage teaches nothing about homosexual behavior between two consenting and committed partners. It is that latter situation that is being advocated today so the account of Sodom and Gomorrah is not really relevant to today's debate.

What does God's Word have to say about contemporary homosexual practices in general? Look at the teaching of the Mosaic Law in Leviticus. "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. . . . If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable" (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). Those verses seem clear at first reading, but we might be asked whether we have interpreted them in their context.

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices.'" (Lev. 18:1-3)

This chapter, it could be said, is aimed at guarding the Israelites from the fertility worship of the Canaanites. They practiced sacred prostitution, but Moses teaches here that it was to have no part in the worship of the God of Israel. What is being forbidden then is not homosexual behavior in general but only homosexual behavior in the service of idols.

Closer study of the passage reveals that there are actually two underlying principles at work here. One is the separation of the Israelites from anything connected to idol worship. A more fundamental principle should not be overlooked. The Old Testament teaches in the opening chapters of Genesis and in the Ten Commandments that sexual intimacy was intended for and should be limited to the heterosexual marriage relationship. Any other form of genital sexual intimacy was forbidden by God. The teaching of Leviticus 18 is not just a response to the idol worship of the Canaanites; it is also a reiteration of Genesis 1 and 2. Even D. Sherwin Bailey recognized that. He wrote, "It is hardly open to doubt that both the laws in Leviticus relate to ordinary homosexual acts between men, and not to ritual or other acts performed in the name of religion."¹

¹ Quoted in D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (Harlow, England: Longmans, Green, 1955), 4; quoted in John R.W. Stott, *Homosexual Partnerships?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 10.

The prohibitions in Leviticus are often dismissed or ridiculed today as irrelevant. After all, it is said, should we also put practicing homosexuals to death as Leviticus 20:13 teaches? And should we prohibit the wearing of clothes that are made from two kinds of material as Leviticus 19:19 says? Such arguments may enable the defenders of homosexual practices to score debating points, but they do not do justice to the teaching of Leviticus or the Bible as a whole.

The same sections of Leviticus forbid stealing, lying, and fraud (Lev. 19:11-13). Should those ethical principles also be dismissed? And what about the teaching of Leviticus 19:18 in which we are told to “love your neighbor as yourself”? Since Jesus quotes that passage and labels it as the second greatest commandment (Matt. 22:39), we should be hesitant before we dismiss the entire Levitical law as antiquated and irrelevant.

Issues of interpretation and application involving the laws in Leviticus are complex. The New Testament demonstrates that the coming of Christ changes the application of some of them (see Mark 7:14-22), but the New Testament also endorses the Old Testament law’s abiding relevance. How do we account for both the continuity and discontinuity between Old Testament law and New Testament teaching? We should be careful before we quickly dismiss the sexual ethics found in Leviticus 18 and 20. Do we find theological principles in the New Testament that would lead us to conclude that the fundamental principles of those chapters still apply?

The best-known New Testament passage addressing the issue of homosexual practices is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for the unnatural ones (*para physin*). 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, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. (Rom. 1:26-27)

A question can be raised over the use of the word *natural*. “Even their women exchanged natural relations for the unnatural ones” (Rom. 1:26b). What about people who have no “natural” attraction to the opposite sex? The man who is “naturally” attracted to other males is not being described here, is he? Couldn’t this verse be interpreted to mean that it is sinful for a person who is “naturally” heterosexual to abandon that “natural” desire and engage in homosexual activity? Isn’t that what the passage is teaching? In fact, doesn’t this passage seem to imply that those who “naturally” have homosexual desires should not abandon their “natural” desires and try to be something that they aren’t?

Again that interpretation seems convincing, but there are three major reasons to believe that *natural* cannot be understood in this way. First, we have evidence from the first century writers Philo and Josephus. Both of them used the same Greek expression that Paul did. For example, Josephus wrote, “The law recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature (*kata physin*), that which is with a woman” (*Against Apion* 2.199). Josephus uses *nature* to refer to that which God has created, not to what comes “naturally” to a human being. Since that is the way that Jewish writers of the first century used the term, there must be compelling reason to think that Paul used the term in a different way.

Second, the immediate context in Romans must be considered because words are only properly understood in their literary context. Verses 26 and 27 follow Paul's mention of creation in verse 25. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen." Therefore, *natural* in the following two verses should be understood to refer to God's original plan for nature. "Even their women exchanged natural relations for the unnatural ones" (Rom. 1:26). The women exchanged the natural relations--that is, the heterosexual relations which God had originally intended--for unnatural ones--that is, lesbian relations.

There is a third problem inherent in the proposed revised interpretation. If such reasoning applies to homosexual behavior, it should also apply to other behaviors that are mentioned in this passage. "They have become filled with envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice" (Rom. 1:29). If those actions arise from desires that come naturally to a person, does that make them ethically appropriate? Imagine someone saying, "I don't know where my desire to lie comes from. It's been a part of my thinking for as long as I can remember. It's just the way I am." Would anyone suggest that for the person who reasons that way, lying is acceptable? Neither can it apply to the homosexual actions described in verses 26 and 27. To reason in such a manner robs Romans 1 of all its moral force.

Homosexual relationships are also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:19 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Translations vary in the way that the pertinent Greek words are translated. *Malakoi* may be translated as "male prostitute" or "effeminate" or "pervert." *Arsenokoitai* may be translated as "homosexual offenders" or "sodomites." Those advocating a new interpretation of the Bible's teaching on homosexuality often state that *malakoi* refers to the younger passive male in homosexual intercourse while *arsenokoitai* refers to the older active male in homosexual intercourse. They then go on to point out that such a pederastic relationship in which a youth was sexually exploited by an older male was the only kind of homosexual relationship known in the ancient world. Since the apostle Paul did not know of a consensual and committed sexual relationship between two males, his teaching cannot be applied to today's homosexual relationships.

This teaching requires some careful examination. First, it is doubtful that we should restrict the two terms to partners in a pederastic relationship because there were established Greek terms for those partners. If Paul had intended to single out pederasts, he could have easily used the term *paidēastes*. But Paul chose not to use that accepted term. Doesn't that indicate that he probably had something else in mind?

Second, what do *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* actually mean? The word *malakoi* means "the soft ones." It may well mean the passive partner or the one who played the female role in homosexual intercourse, but we cannot be sure of that. The New Testament is the first ancient document to use the term *arsenokoitai*. The term comes from two Greek words meaning "male" and "bed." But what is the precise meaning of the combined words? Recent studies convincingly demonstrate that Paul probably coined the term from the Septuagint or Greek translation of the Levitical passages that forbid homosexual acts. In the Septuagint, Leviticus 18:22 reads *meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynakios* and Leviticus 20:13 reads *hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos*. The underlined words in the Greek transliterations show how Paul took terms from those Levitical passages in order to make his new term. The Levitical passages themselves do not

specify any one kind of homosexual behavior; therefore, it is unlikely that Paul had only a pederastic relationship in mind when he coined his new word. Furthermore, Paul's coining of a term by combining expressions from the Levitical passages that prohibit homosexual practices demonstrates his familiarity with those passages. He recognized the abiding ethical truth found in those Old Testament prohibitions and relied upon them in order to give instructions to the early Christians.²

Third, it should also be questioned whether Paul was only knowledgeable of exploitative homosexual relationships. Plato's *Symposium*, which was written around 416 B.C., includes several speeches extolling loving relationships between a youth and an older male. For example, Plato records Aristophanes as saying, ". . . they are both so intoxicated with affection, with friendship, and with love, that they cannot bear to let each other out of sight for a single instant. It is such reunions as these that impel men to spend their lives together, although they may be hard put to it to say what they really want with one another, and indeed, the purely sexual pleasures of their friendship could hardly account for the huge delight they take in one another's company" (192c). Since this teaching appeared in Greek culture at least four hundred years before Paul's time, it can hardly be maintained that the ancient world knew nothing of loving homosexual relationships. But Paul made no differentiation between various kinds of homosexual relationships; he was opposed to all of them.

Some advocates of the new interpretation cap off their reasoning by pointing out that very few passages in the Bible even address the issue of homosexuality. The so-called "Clobber Passages" from Genesis, Leviticus, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy should not be given such prominence. Obviously, they say, the Bible doesn't care that much about homosexual behavior. Why then should Christians get so worked up over it?

Making it appear that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality can be limited to just a few verses overlooks the obvious. The Bible does more than say that homosexual practices are wrong. It also presents a positive model for human sexuality starting in Genesis 1. The account of Adam and Eve teaches that God's plan is for sexual intimacy to take place in a marital relationship between a man and a woman. Furthermore, the Song of Songs endorses heterosexual marriage. In fact, throughout the Old Testament heterosexual marriage is presented as God's model for sexual intercourse.

What do we find in the New Testament? Jesus and the apostles consistently reinforce the importance of heterosexual marriage. Sometimes it is said that Jesus didn't say anything about homosexuality; therefore, he must not have thought that it was wrong or that it was important enough to address. Such an argument from silence proves nothing. Jesus didn't say anything about incest either, but that doesn't mean that he would approve of it. Is there anything in the New Testament that would suggest that Jesus thought that the Old Testament teaching on heterosexual marriage needed to be expanded to include same-sex relationships? On the contrary, Jesus consistently reinforced Old Testament sexual standards.

Seen against the positive teaching that the Bible gives on heterosexual intimacy, the passages that specifically prohibit homosexual practices become even clearer. They are not a

² Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 95-96.

few obscure Bible passages that Bible-thumping fundamentalists use to clobber homosexual advocates. Rather, they are commandments that naturally arise from the positive teaching that the Bible gives on human sexuality.

Some advocates of a new approach toward homosexual practice have recognized that the proposed reinterpretations of the Bible will not stand up under scrutiny. They readily acknowledge that the Bible consistently disapproves of homosexual practices. For example, Dan Via, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Duke University, admits that “the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally.”³ Luke Timothy Johnson, Professor on New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology, writes:

The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. . . .

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality . . .⁴

The advocates of homosexual practice then take a different tack. They say that broader principles of Bible teaching should encourage us to take a different stand on the issue. For example, Jesus’ teaching about loving and caring for others should take precedence over any negative commands. If Christians were to care truly for those with homosexual orientations, the church would work hard to make sure that all people regardless of their sexual orientation can enjoy God’s good gift of sexual intimacy. The demands of justice also require a new stance toward homosexual practices.

While such reasoning is popular and initially persuasive, it too needs to be examined. What is love? Does love mean simply approving of whatever anyone wants to do? Does Jesus’ teaching on love amount to nothing more than the modern notion of tolerance? Such an approach to love hardly accounts for the totality of New Testament teaching. Jesus did not harshly and mercilessly condemn people caught in sin. But neither did he approve of all kinds of behavior and affirm people in whatever they wanted to do. In regard to sexual sin Jesus was not hesitant to call people to repentance and to tell them to “go and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). Jesus urges his followers to “seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). To be faithful to Jesus’ example, Christians today need to practice compassion while they simultaneously affirm God’s unchanging standards for sexual behavior.

³ Dan O. Via and Robert A.J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 93.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson and Eve Tushnet, “Homosexuality and the Church: Two Views,” *Commonweal*, 15, June 2007. Accessed August 1, 2012 at: <http://commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1>.

An Old Testament proverb aptly describes the current debate: “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him” (Prov. 18:17). D.S. Bailey and others who have followed his revised interpretation of the Bible’s teaching on homosexual practices do make what seems to be a convincing case. If someone has not carefully studied the biblical teaching on this subject, it may appear that the Bible says nothing negative about contemporary homosexual practices. But once that new interpretation is investigated, it fails to be persuasive. “The doubt created by Dr. Bailey has traveled more widely than the reasons he produces for it. Not one of these reasons, it may be suggested, stands any serious scrutiny.”⁵

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⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 137.