



CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

How a conservative reading of the biblical references to homosexuality *fails* to support their traditional interpretation

by Steve Schuh

For some Bible readers the message of the scriptures is clear – God condemns all homosexual behavior, even that expressed within loving and committed same-sex relationships. It is, for them, a matter of applying the ‘golden rule’ of Bible interpretation: “If the plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense.” To these readers it appears that those who defend same-sex relationships are ignoring the Bible’s clear statements condemning all homosexual activity.

For other Bible readers, however, a ‘plain sense’ understanding of the texts is no longer obviously ‘common sense,’ due in part to the emergence of a scientific view of sexual orientation and to the Christian testimonies of gay and lesbian people. The conventional, negative interpretation is no longer obviously common sense, so serious Bible students dig deeper.

Many Christians – including a growing number of evangelicals – are finding that a close, conservative reading of the biblical texts, aided by the best evangelical scholarship, suggests that the popular, disapproving summary of ‘what the Bible says’ about homosexuality is not supported by the Bible itself.

This essay addresses the dozen or so Bible passages often cited as referring to homosexuality, highlighting their original, biblical contexts and how the texts were understood within the Bible itself. It then outlines how the original ‘then and there’ of the texts and the contemporary ‘here and now’ of same-sex relationships compare, which suggests how these biblical texts might properly inform the current debate.

THE SIN OF SODOM

The story of the destruction of Sodom figures prominently in the popular imagination as a primary demonstration of God’s severe judgment against homosexuality. A close look at the biblical account itself – and even a quick survey of references to the story by Jesus and biblical writers – suggests that the traditional way of telling this story is way off track.

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As recorded in **Genesis 18-19**, God sent two angels to Sodom to verify unspecified accusations of wickedness made against the people of the city. After visiting Abraham along the way, the angels arrived at Sodom where Lot, Abraham's brother, welcomed the angels into his home. That evening, however, all of the men of the city gathered at Lot's door and demanded that the visitors be handed over, "that we may know them" (King James Version). Lot tried to dissuade the crowd by offering them his virgin daughters, but the mob refused and pushed against the door. The angels finally intervened and sent Lot and his family away before destroying Sodom and all of the people and land in the surrounding area.

Although some scholars have suggested that the men of Sodom might not have intended the angels harm, a violent motivation is clear in the remarkably similar story in Judges 19 in which the men of Gibeah of the Hebrew tribe of Benjamin accosted a visiting Levite priest with the identical demand, "that we might know him" (KJV). Unlike the men in Sodom, the Gibeon mob accepted the woman offered as a substitute, raped her repeatedly, and she died, allowing the priest to escape unharmed. On hearing his report, the other Hebrew tribes took vengeance, and the Benjaminites were nearly destroyed.¹

Assuming, then, that the mob in Sodom intended similar sexual violence against Lot's guests, does that mean that the men of Sodom were homosexuals?

The Bible does not say. The text does not describe their sexual orientation, and of course the modern concept itself would be foreign to the original writer and readers. It is quite unlikely that "all the men from every part of the city of Sodom – both young and old" (Genesis 19:4, NIV)² were homosexually oriented, but the text itself simply does not and could not tell us.

But was Sodom destroyed because of homosexual activity?

Again, the Bible itself does not tell us. Neither in the first telling of the Sodom story in Genesis, nor in any later biblical reference to it, does the Bible specify or remark on a homosexual element in the mob's threat. In fact, although the Hebrew prophets described the sin of Sodom repeatedly and in detail, homosexual acts are never named in the Bible as the reason for Sodom's destruction.³ Biblical writers frequently referred to Sodom's arrogance, gluttony, self-interest, its indifference to the needs of the poor, sexual immorality, and its rejection of God's holy messengers – as did Jesus – but never homosexual acts specifically.⁴

Well, was the threatened crime in Sodom at least homosexual in nature?

¹ In his later report of the incident, the priest didn't mention a sexual threat against himself, only that the mob intended to kill him and raped his concubine. Even without a homosexual threat, the priest's telling of the incident prompted war against the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20:4-7).

² Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are from *Holy Bible, New International Version*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervon, 1984.

³ Cf. Genesis 13:13, 18:20; Deuteronomy 29:23, 32:32; Isaiah 1:9, 3:9, 13:19; Ezekiel 16:49-51; Jeremiah 23:14, 49:18, 50:40; Lamentations 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:9; Matthew 11:23-24; Luke 10:12, 17:29; Romans 9:29; and Revelation 11:8.

⁴ The same is true of references to Sodom in the deuterocanonical, pseudepigraphical, and Talmudic literature which "go into great detail in their portrait of Sodomite cruelty and injustice, but show little interest in elaborating the few references to Sodom's sexual sins." Michael Carden, *Sodomy: the History of a Christian Biblical Myth*, London: Equinox; 2004; p.99.

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The Bible does address this, and no, not even the threat is homosexual. From the opening words of the Sodom story the visitors are identified as *angels*, not human males (Genesis 19:1 and 18:2, NIV). In the New Testament, the incident in Sodom is compared to the “slander of celestial beings” (Jude 5-10) and the abandonment by angels of their proper domain (2 Peter 2:4-12). The writer of Hebrews cautioned, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).⁵ Jesus also invoked the memory of Sodom’s destruction as a warning against those who would not receive his disciples, sent like the angels as God’s messengers (Matthew 10:11-16).

Biblically speaking, then, the significance of the Sodom story lies in the mob’s apparent threat of violence against angels. That the major theme in the story’s retelling during the Christian era became homosexuality – rather than assault against angels, violent gang rape, the abuse of women, inhospitality, or xenophobia – tells us a great deal about the cultures that inherited the Sodom story but nothing about the biblical account itself.

Contrary to conventional wisdom then, the Bible does not support the traditional association of Sodom with homosexuality. Nothing in the text indicates that Sodom was destroyed because of homosexual acts, threatened or otherwise, nor does it even hint that the men of Sodom were motivated by a desire for sex with other men, as opposed to sex with angels, or simply violence.

In fact, the Bible does not indicate whether the people of Sodom *ever* engaged in homosexual acts. Scripture describes Sodom’s immorality repeatedly and in detail, and it frequently cites Sodom as a vivid example to avoid, but the Bible itself never attributes Sodom’s destruction to homosexuality. As with the seldom-mentioned story of Gibeah, any imagined homosexual threat goes unremarked by biblical writers.

THE HOLINESS CODE AND HEBREW HISTORY

There is little doubt, however, that two verses in Israel’s legal code refer to male homosexual acts: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is [*toevah*]” (**Leviticus 18:22**, ESV),⁶ and the less-often quoted, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed [*toevah*]; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (**Leviticus 20:13**, ESV).

These prohibitions appear among the many laws of Israel’s ‘Holiness Code’ which defined ancient Hebrew community and religious life, an integrated legal code and social order intended to separate and distinguish Israel from its neighbors. Among its laws related to agriculture, family life, hygiene, diet, commerce, and religious practice, the Holiness Code

⁵ Footnoted in the NIV as a reference to Sodom.

⁶ Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Wheaton IL: Good News Publishers, 2001.

prohibited both the worship of foreign gods and the worship of Israel's god by inappropriate means.⁷

Leviticus 18 introduces one subset of these laws. Within this chapter Hebrew men were prohibited from engaging in sex with women of varying degrees of kinship, sex with a woman during her menstrual period of 'uncleanness,' sex with a neighbor's wife, the sacrificial offering of 'seed'⁸ to Molech (v.21),⁹ sex with other males (v.22),¹⁰ and sex with animals (v.23).¹¹ Importantly, the list concludes with this caution:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because *this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled*. ... Everyone who does any of these [*toevah*] things – such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep my requirements and *do not follow any of the [toevah] customs that were practiced before you came* and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God (v.24,29-30, NIV, emphasis added).

Leviticus 20 begins with an extended warning against sacrificing to Molech (vv.1-5), provides a punishment for each of the prohibitions of chapter 18, and ends with a very similar warning.

The historical books of the Hebrew Bible confirm that pagan religious practice in the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East was often overtly sexual. Intercourse with a representative of a fertility deity, for example, was thought to elicit the productivity of land, animals, and people, and many of Israel's neighbors institutionalized religious prostitution for this purpose. S.M. Baugh defines cult prostitution in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* as sexual "union with a prostitute (whether with a female or a male makes no difference) for exchange of money or goods, which was sanctioned by the wardens of a deity whether in temple precincts or elsewhere as a sacred act of worship."¹² Worship of Molech included human sacrifice and cult prostitution, as did the worship of Asherah (or Ashtoreth), his consort.

⁷ Steven Barabas, "Idolatry", *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. J.D. Douglas, Merrill C. Tenney; Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987; p.459.

⁸ The precise meaning of this phrase is uncertain – in this context, most literally the votive offering of semen (Martin S. Cohen, "The Biblical Prohibition of Homosexual Intercourse," *Journal of Homosexuality* 19:4, 1990, pp.3-21), though typically thought to refer to offspring and thus child sacrifice (religious infanticide), or perhaps the dedication of children to the service of the god (perhaps sexual servitude) or, least likely, procreation with pagan women (Moshe Weinfeld, "Cult of Moloch," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*; Jerusalem: Keter, 1971; p.231).

⁹ The Semetic god Baal (*Molech* in Hebrew) was widely worshipped in the ancient Near East. Talmudic tradition holds the brazen image of Molech to have been of a man with the head of a bull, seated on a throne with arms extended to receive sacrifices. Hebrew children were sacrificed to Molech at Topheth just SW of Jerusalem. "In the reign of Ahab, Baal was served in Israel by 450 priests, as well as by prophets ... The ordinary offering made to the god consisted of incense and burnt sacrifices; on extraordinary occasions the victim was human. At times the priests worked themselves into a state of ecstasy, and dancing round the altar slashed themselves with knives" ("Definition of BAAL", *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, ed.; 1915).

¹⁰ "According to all exegetes, what is condemned is homosexual anal coitus." Pim Pronk, *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1993; p.270.

¹¹ Sex with animals is also grouped with cultic practices of idolatry in Exodus 22:19-20.

¹² S.M. Baugh, "Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42.3, 1999; p.444. In Greek, the sexual union is called *hieros gamos*, or 'sacred marriage'. This well-documented ritual figures in Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, and Stanley Kubrick's film, *Eyes Wide Shut*.

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The temple personnel used in these religious rites were called *qadeshim* and *qadeshoth* in Hebrew – ‘holy men’ and ‘holy women’¹³ – and they were specifically prohibited in Israel:

No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute. You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God [*toevah*] them both” (**Deuteronomy 23:17-18**, NIV).¹⁴

Despite these prohibitions and warnings, the Hebrew people gradually adopted their neighbor’s pagan customs, initially appropriating pagan rites in their worship of Yahweh before worshiping the foreign gods directly.¹⁵ King Solomon dedicated ‘high places’ to Molech, Ashtoreth, and all the gods of his foreign wives (1 Kings 11), and his son Rehoboam continued the practice:

They also set up for themselves high places, sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; *the people engaged in all the [toevah] practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites* (**1 Kings 14:22-24**, NIV, emphasis added).

But there were also kings who opposed the pagan rites: “[Asa] expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his fathers had made. He even deposed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother, because she had made a repulsive Asherah pole” (**1 Kings 15:11-14**, NIV). Jehoshaphat “rid the land of the rest of the male shrine prostitutes who remained there even after the reign of his father Asa” (**1 Kings 22:41-46**, NIV). Later king Josiah renewed the holy covenant, destroyed the Asherah pole and the houses of the males shrine prostitutes in the temple in Jerusalem, and desecrated all of the high places, including Topheth, “so no one could use it to sacrifice his son or daughter in the fire to Molech” (**2 Kings 23:4-25**, NIV).

Of particular interest in this study is the *qadeshim*, the ‘male shrine prostitutes’ (NIV). While the Bible provides little detail, the evidence strongly suggests their service was homosexual.¹⁶

¹³ Steven Barabas, “Baal,” *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney; Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987; p.113. See Genesis 38:21 for the first biblical reference to the *qadesh*.

¹⁴ Royce Buehler claims that every prohibition in Leviticus 18 is repeated in Deuteronomy except the prohibition against male homosexual acts unless this prohibition against male shrine prostitution is understood as such (“A Defense Theory: An Analysis of Six Critical Texts Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” www.whosoever.org; retrieved June 6, 2007).

¹⁵ Psalm 106:34-39 (NIV): “They did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves.”

¹⁶ Similar in function to the male *assinu* in Mesopotamia (“whom Istar had changed from men into women”), the *qdsim* of Syria and Phoenicia, and the ‘temple boys’ of Carthage. Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Cultic Prostitution: A Case Study in Cultural Diffusion” (pp.213-222), and Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East” (pp.81-90), in *Orient and Occident: Essays presented to Cyrus H. Gordon* (Neukirchen-Vluyn and Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercher; 1973).

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In his linguistic study of the Greek Old Testament translations of *qadesh* published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, James DeYoung demonstrates that all of the terms have a sexual connotation, most having a religious meaning tied to the sexual.¹⁷

Noting the clear echo of the concluding cautions of Leviticus 18 and 20 in 1 Kings 14 (italicized in the texts above), DeYoung argues that the *qadeshim* not only engaged in homosexual acts but that the writer of 1 Kings understood their religious service in light of the Levitical prohibitions against male homosexual acts. He notes further that the three passages are uniquely connected by the word *toevah* — typical of biblical references to idolatry¹⁸ — used in these passages to describe the customs of the nations the Lord would or had already driven out of the land. He concludes that the biblical texts, in both Hebrew and Greek, suggest cult prostitution and homosexual practice.

Robert Gagnon — whose 2001 tome, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, is touted by many conservatives as the definitive argument against same-sex relationships — admits that male cult prostitution was the most acceptable context for homosexual intercourse in the ancient Near East,¹⁹ and more pointedly, “Homosexual cult prostitution appears to have been the primary form in which homosexual intercourse was practiced in Israel.”²⁰

In fact, idolatry is not just the *primary* context in which homosexual acts appear in the Old Testament — it is the *only* context. The homosexual acts prohibited in Leviticus 18 and 20 are described in the immediate context of idolatry and therefore very likely refer to ritual acts of male homosexual prostitution, as evidenced by at least five historical, biblical references. They appear beside other examples of idolatry intentionally, for they were, like child sacrifice, idol worship, and the sex rites of fertility cults, primary expressions of pagan religion.

NEW TESTAMENT VICE LISTS

There are three New Testament references to homosexual acts, all of them from Paul, two of which appear in ‘vice lists’ of sinners from whom early Christians were called out:

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the [*pornoï*] nor idolaters nor adulterers nor [*malokoi*] nor [*arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NIV).

¹⁷ James B. DeYoung, “The Contributions of the Septuagint to Biblical Sanctions Against Homosexuality”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 34/2 (June 1991); pp.157-177.

¹⁸ *Toevah* is rendered ‘abomination’ in the KJV and ‘detestable’ in the NIV, though its strong association with idolatry suggests a specifically religious meaning, akin to ‘ritually unclean’ and ‘anathema.’ In his word study Buehler found that 86% of the time, “when Leviticus uses the word *toevah*, it is using the word as it is most often used before the exile; it is referring to the worship of idols” (Buehler; *ibid*).

¹⁹ Robert Gagnon, “The Bible and Homosexual Practice: An Overview of Some Issues;” Leadership U, www.leaderu.com; retrieved June 6, 2007.

²⁰ Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001; p.130.

“We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for [pornoi] and [arsenokoitai], for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:9-10, NIV).

While scholars generally agree that Paul was referring in 1 Corinthians 6 to males involved in homosexual acts, the precise meaning of the Greek words ‘malokoi’ and ‘arsenokoitai’ is contested. Paul appears to have coined ‘arsenokoitai’, avoiding both the technical and slang vocabulary available for homosexual acts and providing little in the way of descriptive context.

Nonetheless, the *malokoi* (literally, “the soft”) are frequently thought to be youthful or effeminate male prostitutes used by the male *arsenokoitai* for sex. Gordon Fee, whose commentary on Corinthians is a fixture of evangelical biblical studies, offers an especially ‘dynamic equivalent’ for the *malokoi-arsenokoitai* word-pair: “young male prostitutes and the men who fuck them,” reflecting the specific gender, sex act, relationship, and rhetorical impact he sees implied in this passage.²¹

The list in Timothy also lacks context, but many scholars see parallels to the 10 commandments, the *pornois-arsenokoitais* pair illustrating the seventh commandment against adultery. Gagnon reads the *pornoi* of Corinthians as prostitutes,²² so both lists may include the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ participants in male homosexual prostitution.

Although commentators often assume a secular, Greco-Roman cultural setting for Paul’s references to homosexuality, several evangelical scholars suggest that Paul’s compound word *arsenokoitai* very likely finds its origin in the Greek Old Testament. Writing in *Evangelical Quarterly*, David Wright notes that the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 include *arsenos* (‘male’) and *koiten* (‘bed’), and the words appear side-by-side in 20:13.²³ Richard B. Hayes repeats Robin Scroggs’ claim that *arsenokoitai* is derived directly from Leviticus and that Paul almost certainly had these verses in mind when writing to Timothy and the Corinthians.²⁴

If true, these New Testament verses share the same cultural backdrop as the Levitical prohibitions, that is, Israel’s history of idolatry and cult prostitution.²⁵ Supporting this view, both Corinth and Ephesus (where Timothy lived) were primary centers of fertility religion, of

²¹ Personal interview with the author, December 1999. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; p.243-244. Most Bible translations blur some or all of these distinctions, *Today’s NIV* going as far as rendering the word-pair as “those who engage in homosexual acts”, even ignoring Paul’s obvious gender specificity.

²² Gagnon, “Overview;” *ibid.*

²³ David F. Wright, “Homosexuality: the Relevance of the Bible,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 61:4, 1989; p.297. Wright also made this case in “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἀρσενοκοῖται” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, 1984; pp.125-153. Although he traces *arsenokoitai* back to Leviticus, Wright claims the word’s association with the “less restricted Levitical ban” broadens its meaning to denote “‘male homosexual activity’ without qualification” (*Vigiliae Christianae* 41, 1987; p.397-398). Like Hayes, Wright thus simultaneously establishes the word’s historicity and ignores it.

²⁴ Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996; p.382.

²⁵ That Hebrew history rather than secular Greek culture should inform Paul’s worldview and vocabulary is not surprising. Cf. Donald H. Akenson, *St. Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus*; New York: Oxford, 2000.

Aphrodite and Artemis, respectively. Whether cult prostitution was practiced in these locations at the time of Paul's writing or merely lingered as part of the cities' storied past, the gender-bending mania they celebrated remained part of many Greco-Roman cults for centuries.

In another article for *JETS*, Catherine Kroger explains that in the Dionysian cults, men masqueraded as women, wearing veils and long hair as signs of their dedication to the god. "The sex exchange that characterized the cults of such great goddesses as Cybele, the Syrian goddess, and Artemis of Ephesus was more grisly. Males voluntarily castrated themselves and assumed women's garments." A Roman relief shows a castrated high priest of Cybele wearing veil, necklaces, earrings and feminine dress. "He is considered to have exchanged his sexual identity and to have become a she-priest."²⁶

Two hundred years after Paul, Eusebius (c.260-339 CE) reported the prostitution of women and effeminate men at another temple dedicated to Aphrodite, men "soft and womanish – men no longer, the dignity of their sex they rejected; with impure lust they thought to honour the deity."²⁷ Paul's mention of the effeminate *malokoi* in this setting therefore supports a religious rather than secular understanding of their prostitution.

Pagan religious practice is also referenced in 1 Corinthians 6 itself. The vice list – which catalogues, in order, prostitutes, idol worshippers, adulterers, *malokoi* and *arsenokoitai* – is immediately followed by a discussion about prostitution that includes temple imagery and allusions to idol foods.²⁸ Paul contrasts union with Christ to union with a prostitute, perhaps alluding to the 'sacred marriage' rites of fertility cults.²⁹ The immediate juxtaposition of the *malokoi* and *arsenokoitai* with prostitutes and idolaters in the text – and the likely origin of the vocabulary itself in the Levitical prohibitions – only reinforces this idea and is consistent with the Old Testament cultural context for homosexual acts as expressions of pagan religion.

ROMANS 1

Although it is often abstracted or ignored, the connection between male homosexual acts and idolatry seen in the previous passages is equally apparent in Paul's argument in Romans, a highly polished theological treatise in which the apostle proclaims the gospel of Christ, "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (1:16, NIV).

Of course the Christian gospel posed a significant obstacle for Jews who believed themselves deserving of God's favor by virtue of their unique heritage alone. Where they relied on the covenant God had made with their ancestors and prided themselves in the Law, the

²⁶ Catherine Kroeger, "The Apostle Paul and Greco-Roman Cults of Women," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 30/1, March 1987; p.37.

²⁷ From Eusebius' *Life of Constantine the Great* (III:55), in George Rawlinson, *History of Phoenicia* (1889); www.gutenberg.org; retrieved June 6, 2007.

²⁸ See Fee, *Corinthians*; p.258, n.39.

²⁹ Arthur Darby Nock suggests that Paul uses *hieros gamos* as a metaphor in describing the mysterious relationship between Christ and the Church, the two becoming one, in Ephesians 5:32 and 2 Corinthians 11:2 (*Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background*; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964; p.30, n.8).

temple, and their privileged designation as God's 'chosen people,' salvation in Christ required that they divest themselves of previous entitlements.

Paul's evangelistic task, therefore, is to draw the Jews of his audience into admitting the failure of the law to deliver genuine righteousness, and he does so not by negating or ignoring the law but by leveraging it. Immediately after declaring that "the *righteousness* of God is revealed" in the gospel for the salvation of all who believe (1:17), Paul writes that "the *wrath* of God is revealed" against those who reject the truth about God as revealed in creation, apart from the law (1:18). In increasingly vivid detail, he illustrates the conspicuous nature of the pagan rejection of God and its typical consequences, evidence of God's just wrath (1:21-32). As quickly as his Jewish readers agree that God's judgment against pagan sinfulness is just, Paul turns the argument around and confronts them with their hypocrisy, for they have done the very same things (2:1-24). History proves, he writes, that the law offers no escape from justice. The law, in fact, condemns those who try to observe it, and this is the law's true value (3:20). Judgment and salvation come to Jew and Gentile alike by virtue of their common sinfulness and shared faith in Christ (3:23-30).

Paul's Jewish readers are therefore included with Gentiles in God's new salvation story, drawn there by an argument that pivots on a thoroughly convincing depiction of pagan unrighteousness, a rhetorical trap laid in Romans 1:18-32.

In this tightly ordered paragraph Paul recounts the familiar story of a people who knew the truth about God by observation of God's creation, but they turned away: "although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (v.21, NIV). Paul illustrates their rejection of God – and its consequences – with three vivid examples:

1. They *exchanged* the *glory of God* for idols which they modeled after earthly creatures, *so God gave them up* to their corrupted hearts and degraded bodies (vv.22-24).
2. They *exchanged* the *truth of God* for a lie by worshiping their idols rather than the eternal God, *so God gave them up* to their degraded desire (vv.25-26a).
3. Females *exchanged* the 'natural use for the unnatural,' and males likewise gave themselves to be used shamefully by other males – they ignored the *knowledge of God*, *so God gave them up* to their ignorance, to do what ought not to be done (vv.26b-28).

Each of the three examples describes the *exchange* (same Greek root-word)³⁰ of a *divine attribute* (God's glory, truth and knowledge, respectively) for a substitute, which prompts God to '*give them up*' (identical phrase). There follows a long list of destructive behaviors, the consequences of pagan rebellion (vv.29-32).

Roman Catholic New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne helpfully describes this series of grammatical repetitions as 'waves.' Each wave is distinct, he says, beginning with an 'exchange' and cresting with God's 'giving them up,' flowing from cause into effect. Each wave then flows seamlessly into the next, building in intensity until the third wave ends with a

³⁰ *Allassan* in v.23, *metallassan* in vv.25 and 26.

crash.³¹ The wave structure and repetitive vocabulary emphasize the willful rejection of God each exchange describes as well as the fluid connections between the three exchanges themselves.

Unfortunately, Paul's careful construction is often lost on contemporary readers, the repetition obscured by verse notations and paragraph formatting and by the apparently unassociated juxtaposition of exchanges – idol-making, idol-worship, and 'unnatural' gender exchanges. The parallelism of the wave structure thus broken, the 'unnatural' exchanges of the third wave are often erroneously labeled the *effect* of God's giving-up rather than its *cause* – the *consequences* of idolatry rather than the third *example* of it.

Paul's first readers faced no such difficulty, partly because the cultural associations between the three waves would have been obvious to them (as we have already seen), and because the sermon itself was already familiar. Romans 1:18-32 bears striking resemblance to Psalm 106³² and whole chapters of the Wisdom of Solomon – near quotation at several points³³ – which suggests that Paul purposefully borrowed from the established tradition to draw his Jewish readers in.³⁴ In his more formal structuring of the material, the sprawling descriptions of idol-making, idol-worship, and sexual immorality from Psalms and Wisdom are distilled into three succinct exchanges, vivid examples of the ways in which those who knew God from creation “neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him” (v.21) but turned instead to idolatry, “the beginning and cause and end of every evil” (Wisdom 14:27).

For readers steeped in the biblical literature, then, a vivid example of sexual immorality would have been expected, and this Paul delivers in the long crescendo of the third wave:

[E]ven their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet (vv.26b-27, KJV).

Out of context, Paul's reference to females who changed “the natural use into that which is against nature” is enigmatic – it is unclear what it was they used unnaturally.³⁵ In the following

³¹ Brendan Byrnes, SJ, *Romans*, Daniel J. Harrington, ed.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996; p.64.

³² Psalm 106:19-23 (NIV, emphasis added): “At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They *exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull*, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. *So he said he would destroy them* – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.” Also Psalm 81:11-12 (NIV, emphasis added): “But my people would not listen to me, Israel would not submit to me. *So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.*” Cf. n.15.

³³ Romans 1:20-32 follows Wisdom 13:1-14:27 at almost every turn.

³⁴ Byrnes, p.65.

³⁵ Unlike recent ‘creation order’ arguments and natural law theories, Paul's use of *physis* (nature) is not synonymous with creation, nor does it have necessary moral import. Cf. for example, Romans 2:14 (even without the law, Gentiles sometimes naturally behave rightly), Romans 2:27 (being uncircumcised is natural), Galatians 2:15 (“We who are Jews by nature, not Gentiles...”), 1 Corinthians 11:14 (nature teaches that long hair is dishonourable on a man), and Romans 11:21-24 (God acted ‘contrary to nature’ in offering salvation to Gentiles). In Paul's usage, then, ‘nature’ connotes that which is culturally typical, characteristic, instinctual, or biological. Cf. James B. DeYoung, “The Meaning of ‘Nature’ in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual

verse he writes that the female exchange was similar to males who abandoned “the natural use of females” for sex with other males. But as James Olthuis, professor emeritus of Toronto’s Institute of Christian Studies, points out, “Paul does not say ‘women with women’ (as he says ‘men with men’).”³⁶ Without a specific indication that the females exchanged male for female sex partners, it is highly doubtful Paul’s original audience would have understood this thin phrase as referring to female homosexuality.³⁷ There were very few literary references to sex between women at the time, and female homosexual acts are neither mentioned elsewhere in the Bible nor prohibited in the rabbinic tradition. Interpreting this phrase as a reference to lesbianism is to suggest that Paul’s audience suspended their understanding of verse 26 until the reference to male homosexual acts in verse 27, then inferred homosexuality backward, contrary to cultural expectations and the author’s rhetorical need.

However, in the context of Paul’s strong parallels between idol-making, idol-worship, and this third exchange, a close reading associates the female exchange with idolatry, very likely the sex rites described in Wisdom for which the local cults of Dionysus and Bacchus were well known.³⁸ In her article for *JETS*, Kroeger explains that the Greco-Roman mystery cults popular among women and some men celebrated an ecstatic frenzy acted-out in drunkenness, orgies, sexual hostility, rape, cross-dressing, gender role-reversal, head-shaving, and voluntary castration – all in the name of their deity.³⁹ Although the Greek historian Strabo’s report that as many as 1,000 priestess-prostitutes once served Aphrodite in Corinth (from which Paul wrote to the Romans) has been challenged, archeological evidence suggests that young women offered their virginity in temporary temple service in many Mediterranean cultures long into the Christian era.

Interestingly, the early church fathers Athanasius, Augustine, and Clement of Alexandria understood the female ‘unnatural’ act of Romans 1:26 as being *heterosexual* anal intercourse, a practice associated with prostitution as a method of contraception.⁴⁰ This, then, could explain the way in which the female and male exchanges in these verses are alike – females and males

Behavior,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31/4, December 1988; p.438. Also, Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* XIV, 1986; p.199.

³⁶ James Olthuis, “When is Sex Against Nature?,” *An Ethos of Compassion and the Integrity of Creation*, eds. Brian J. Walsh, Hendrik Hart, and Robert E. VanderVennen; Lanham: University Press of America, 1995; pp.188-205.

³⁷ James E. Miller, “The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?,” *Novum Testamentum* XXXVII, January 1995; p.8.

³⁸ Wisdom 14:22-27: “So then it was not enough for them to err concerning the knowledge of God, but also, living in the midst of a great war caused by ignorance, they call such great evils peace. For either enacting *rites of childmurder or secret mysteries*, or *frantic revels of strange ordinances*, they *keep neither their lives nor marriages pure*, but one either lying in wait for another slays him or grieves him by *adultery*. And all things are a welter of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, troubling of the good, forgetfulness of favours, pollution of souls, *confusion of sex, disorder in marriage, adultery and debauchery*. For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil.” Joseph Reider, trans, *The Book of Wisdom: an English Translation with Introduction and Commentary*; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957; pp.159-177. Vocabulary potentially related to *pornei* has been emphasized.

³⁹ Kroeger, pp.25-38.

⁴⁰ Miller, *ibid.*

were both penetrated anally, sex ‘contrary to nature.’ As James Miller explains, “[T]he similarity in function described in Romans 1:26 refers to non-coital sexual activities which are engaged by heterosexual women similar to the sexual activities of homosexual males.”⁴¹ Olthuis therefore concludes, “[W]e are left with the fact that there is no negative mention of lesbianism in the Bible.”⁴²

While Paul only sketches the female exchange, he provides a fuller description of the males, who, instead of using women for sex, were themselves used by other men; they ‘burned in their desire’ for one another and behaved ‘shamefully,’ a word usually related to nakedness.

The following phrase adds a helpful detail that may put both the female and male exchanges in perspective: they received back the due “*antimisthia* for their error.”⁴³ The root-word *misthos* means ‘pay, wages or reward.’⁴⁴ Colin Brown, Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, states that the prefix *anti-* may actually heighten the sense of transaction in this verse, emphasizing the impression of an exchange.⁴⁵ We have, then, three exchanges in this third wave: females exchanged natural for unnatural intercourse, males left female for male sex partners, and one or both groups exchanged sex for pay.

As already noted, prostitution – heterosexual and homosexual – could evidence idolatry as clearly and non-metaphorically as idol-making and idol-worship in many Mediterranean cultures.⁴⁶ Following the expected storyline, then, Paul unveils a third, dramatic panel in his triptych of the pagan rejection of God and God-honouring worship. His descriptions of idol-making and idol-worship flow seamlessly into an instantly recognizable portrait of ritualized sexual immorality – very likely female and male cult prostitution – for “the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication [*pornei*], and the invention of them was the corruption of life” (Wisdom 14:8-12, NRSV).⁴⁷

These compounding exchanges are part of the build-up, the crescendo, of the third and final wave which Paul then pushes over the top with another literary flourish – “they did not *think fit* to keep the *knowledge of God in mind*, therefore God gave them up to an *unfit mind*, to do what ought not to be done” (v.28) – and then the whole weight of his tri-fold illustration crashes

⁴¹ Miller; pp.10-11.

⁴² Olthuis; *ibid.*

⁴³ In the KJV, “recompense of their error.” The NIV translates the only other biblical occurrence of *antimisthia* (2 Corinthians 6:13) as ‘fair exchange,’ and most often uses ‘error’ for the common word *plane*. In Romans 1:27 it shockingly offers “penalty for their perversion” though it translates neither *antimisthia* nor *plane* as such anywhere else in the Bible.

⁴⁴ P.C. Bottger, “Misthos”, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 1986; pp. 138-144.

⁴⁵ Colin Brown, “Lytron”, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 1986; p.197.

⁴⁶ Paul never refers to idolatry outside its real-world cultic setting. Some interpreters, however, speak of a secularized ‘idolatry of the heart’ or “idolatry of sex,” divorcing the text from its historical context; e.g. Richard B. Hayes, “Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies”, *Sojourners*; July 20, 1991; pp.17-21.

⁴⁷ New Revised Standard Version Bible, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.

down in an extended description of every kind of human evil, parallel, again, to the Book of Wisdom.

In these final verses of the passage, Paul completes the story of pagan idolatry with a vividness that convinces Jewish readers of the justice of God's judgment in giving up Gentiles to the consequences of their sin. His entire argument is filled with familiar echoes from the Book of Wisdom – of handcrafted idols in the shapes of animals, of the worship of 'dead things,' of the secret rites of mystery cults, frantic revels, adultery and impure marriages, confusion of sex, and an exhausting list of every kind of immorality. It was enough to shame Jew and Gentile alike.

And this is Paul's creative genius. The prophets pointed at the crowd and declared their guilt, but Paul engages them in self-discovery: "at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (2:1, NIV). To their surprise, Paul's Jewish readers recall their own idolatrous past, making and worshipping idols and engaging in religious prostitution.⁴⁸ They, too, rightly deserve God's just wrath and can no longer claim God's favour on the basis of their Jewish heritage alone.⁴⁹

In this context the female and male exchanges serve only to heighten the drama. They are not the focus of Paul's argument, nor is he intending to say anything new – quite the opposite. Woven together with intricate wordplay and gripping detail, the idolatrous sex acts help to drive Jewish readers into the rhetorical trap and, hopefully, into the realization of their need for salvation by faith in Christ alone, which was Paul's hope for them all along.

CONCLUSION: 'HERE AND NOW'

A close reading of the biblical references to homosexuality, therefore, tells a single and wholly consistent story. The Bible refers only to homosexual acts between men, and every mention of them is in the immediate context of pagan idolatry, usually male homosexual cult prostitution. A generalized statement about 'what the Bible says' about homosexuality that fails to include this context violates the integrity of the biblical text itself.

Following a study of the 'then and there' of the biblical texts, careful Bible interpreters must explore how this measures against the 'here and now' of our contemporary situation; in theological terms, hermeneutics necessarily follows exegesis. Only if the 'then and there' and

⁴⁸ Those who argue that Romans 1 does not refer to male homosexual prostitution but some other form of homosexuality must explain how Paul's Jewish readers have "done the same thing," contrary to the biblical evidence.

⁴⁹ In his 2007 Larkin Stuart lecture, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams explained, "Paul insists on shifting the focus away from the *objects* of moral disapprobation in chapter 1 to the reading/hearing *subject* who has been up to this point happily identifying with Paul's castigation of someone else. The complex and interesting argument of chapter 1 ... stands, but now has to be applied not to the pagan world alone but to the 'insiders' of the chosen community."

'here and now' are "genuinely comparable" can we have confidence that "God's word to us is the same as God's word to them,"⁵⁰ which is the traditional claim.

Although this task could be engaged as thoroughly as the first, common sense quickly points a way forward. Most people will recognize that gang-rape and pagan cultic prostitution are fundamentally unlike expressions of love shared by committed and faithful same-sex partners. Acts of violence and idolatry are qualitatively different from acts of love – they have significantly different intents, purposes, and values. It is not hermeneutically legitimate to reassign the Bible's negative assessment of an act committed in the context of violence and cult prostitution to the same act shared in the context of love and life-long fidelity.⁵¹ As is the case for heterosexual sex, while homosexual sex maybe rightly condemned in one context, the same act may be part of God's creative purpose in another.

The plain sense of these texts – in their historical, cultural, biblical contexts – is so unlike the current situation that equating them makes no sense at all. As one writer summarized it, "Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate ... not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issues involved."⁵² Equating homosexual gang rape, prostitution, and idolatry with sexual love expressed within committed same-sex unions is irresponsible biblical interpretation, and it is understandably offensive to gay and lesbian people.

Simply put, a truly conservative reading of the Bible passages said to address homosexuality does not support their traditional interpretation. The conventional wisdom about the Bible and homosexuality, therefore, must be challenged, and a closer reading of the Bible itself is a good place to start.

⁵⁰ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart in *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982; p. 60-61.

⁵¹ Olthuis (*ibid*): "If the negative passages (including Romans 1) focus on known practices such as cultic prostitution, or other exploitative situations such as male prostitution, orgies, sex with inferiors (i.e., slaves), and pederasty, and if in the culture there were no models of reciprocal sexuality between equals, is it hermeneutically legitimate to read the biblical witness as a universal condemnation of any and every form of homosexuality?"

⁵² Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; p.127.

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