

## **The Bible and Homosexuality—Introduction and Overview**

**[This article is the introduction to a series of articles examining each of the proof texts from the *Bible* that are used to argue that homosexuality is sinful. Each article will examine one of these texts in the light of current scholarship.]**

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Before exploring any biblical text, it is important to lay out the assumptions that one makes when coming to the *Bible*. I interpret the *Bible* within the tradition of the Episcopal Church and the wider Anglican Tradition. I also try to apply the best of contemporary biblical scholarship in order to understand what God may be telling us through the *Bible*.

On page 513 of the American *Book of Common Prayer* we find a careful statement of what we Episcopalians believe about the *Bible*. A prospective bishop (or priest on page 526, or deacon on 538) must pledge:

*I...solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation; and I do solemnly engage to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.*

Given this, I do live in the modern world. Within the parameters of this pledge, I would suggest that we also must interpret the *Bible* as we would any other ancient document: using the best collections of the texts involved in their original languages; interpreting them from within the context of their own times, cultures and cultural norms; and while I believe that the *Bible* reveals for us *all that is necessary for salvation*, it does not give us *exhaustive* knowledge about all things.

This series, **The Bible and Homosexuality**, consists of five essays dealing with each of the biblical texts often used to condemn homosexuality and tries to bring to them the best of modern scholarship.

## **The Bible and Homosexuality I: Sodom and Gomorrah**

**[This article is the first in a series of articles examining each of the proof texts from the *Bible* that are used to argue that homosexuality is sinful. Each article will examine one of these texts in the light of current scholarship.]**

The Rev. Edward J. Mills III

In this essay I wish to examine perhaps the most frequently cited biblical text used to condemn homosexuality, the story of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis Chapters 18 and 19, and its twin/mirror text about similar behavior in Gibeah in Judges Chapter 19 (which has no divine judgement, but pretty barbaric human vengeance, attached). When read in their proper cultural and textual context there is no possible way, in my opinion, that Genesis 19 can be read as God's punishment of homosexuality. Neither story is, in fact, about homosexuality at all. However, when read through eyes conditioned by our modern cultural biases and context, particularly through the eyes of those reared as Christians, it is almost impossible to read these texts in any other way.

Parenthetically, I will from, this point forward, be fairly fluid in reference to "the story" (from Genesis) and "the stories" (both of these texts). They are closely related textually. I will specify "the story" when I only intend one of the two texts. Also, I do not intend to discuss the issues of whether the two stories actually refer to historical events. The texts themselves took a life of their own and are the key to how Jewish and Christian beliefs about homosexuality developed -- be they history, legend, or both.

The story of Abraham, Lot, and Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18-19 (which scholars believe to be a self-contained unit, one that contrasts the life of Abraham with Lot/Sodom) is part of what is referred to by scholars as the "J" Document. It is one of several sweeping stories of the early life of Israel blended together in the biblical books from Genesis through II Kings. It uses the covenant name Yahweh for God (Jahweh in German, hence its name) and its beginnings as a written text may go back to the time of David and Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Its interests are those of the southern half of Palestine (later called Judah), its capital Jerusalem, and the monarchy. Other scholars suggest that these interests reflect the time and needs of the later King Josiah and his desire to unify all Israel around an ideology of Davidic calling and destiny and suggest that the text's beginnings are then later, from Josiah's time in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The text from Judges 19 comes from another of these epic stories, one dominated by the theology of the Book of Deuteronomy which is then reflected in the historical books beginning with Joshua and Judges. The roots of this, the Deuteronomist History, may lie much further back historically than the reign of Josiah, but they become living texts from his time on. They provide the theological under-pinning for Josiah's, and later, hopes for a unified, purified nation following the crushing defeat of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, by the Assyrians in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Both texts, the Yahwist Epic and Deuteronomy/the Deuteronomistic History continued to grow and be edited for several generations. Only after the return from the Babylonian Exile in the late 6<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries did they end up woven into the larger story of Israel we now call the Old Testament (the Torah and historical books), which brings us back to the texts themselves.

In **all** the research I did for this essay, scholars were unanimous in the opinion that the most important cultural context for these texts is the hallowed Hebrew cultural more of hospitality and compassion for the alien/sojourner (in Hebrew *gur*), the widow and the orphan. This societal norm is embodied in many biblical texts, but perhaps most clearly in Exodus 22:20-23:

*You shall not wrong a stranger (Hebrew gur) or oppress him, for you were strangers (again, gur) in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to me, and my anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans.*

Serious business. The ancient world was very different than our own. It was centered upon clan and kinship, patriarchy, honor and shame. The patronage and protection of city/village, clan, kin, family, and father were the *only* way one made one's way in the world. Strangers, widows (all women, for that matter—read what happens to the women in our stories!), and orphans had no sponsor, no protector, hence no safety, security or source of the necessities of life. Further, strangers were viewed with great fear and suspicion in the ancient world. They were always feared as possible foreign agents such as Joshua's men sent to spy on Jericho (Joshua 2). The God of Israel again and again commands His people to live beyond their fears and their cultural norms and to practice hospitality and compassion on the weak and powerless. While Exodus 22 *commands* this virtue, the story of Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19 (and the story from Judges 19) *are acted parables* of this virtue—or lack of it.

The Yahwist history is already dropping hints about the corrupt nature of the five cities of the plain (including Sodom and Gomorrah) early in the book of Genesis, as well as that of all of the nations inhabiting the Promised Land (enemies of Israel--more on this later). The scene is set with Abraham as a hero figure earlier. In Chapter 13 Abraham gives Lot the choice of which half of the Land in which to live and Lot chooses the evil cities of the Plain, leaving the Promised Land to Abraham. In Chapter 14 Abraham is a rich sheik who delivers the kings of the Land. Abraham is set *in contrast* to the ephemeral, faithless Lot. Then in our story Chapter 18 portrays Abraham as the paragon of the virtue hospitality to the angels/God (they seem to be both) in contrast with the vacillating Lot and the aggressive, malicious dwellers of Sodom—already known as a notorious city—in Chapter 19. **This, the virtue of hospitality, is the moral of the story.**

It is also the moral of the story for all that reference the story in later biblical writings. Ezekiel, for example, references Sodom by saying, *“Only this was the sin of Sodom: arrogance! She and her daughters (the other cities) had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not support the poor and needy. In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before me, so I removed them, as you saw. (16:49-50).* No mention of sex here, only arrogant, stingy wealth. This in a chapter dripping with sexual imagery about the whoring of Israel after other gods (for example, verse 36 in Hebrew describes Israel as *“your juice was poured out”*, i.e. she was aroused by the other gods, and verse 25 says, *“you spread your legs to every passerby”*). One would think that if the point of the story of Sodom was in any way sexual in nature that Ezekiel would have referenced this fact. He was not bashful about the issue!

By the time of Jesus there were Jewish writers, such as Philo, who began to read the story in terms of sexual “perversion” primarily as a response to their experience of the

excesses of Greek and Roman sexual behavior. Interestingly, Jesus himself did not. Jesus declared the coming judgment upon the cities that rejected his messengers using the words, “*Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on that day than for that town.*” (Luke 10:12). He meant that they shall be judged because of their lack of hospitality (to him and his). The Galilean cities’ sexual practices were simply immaterial to Jesus’ pronouncement. But, back to the details of our story.

**Accurately noting the details of a story is very important in how we interpret a story. Being loose on the details of both of these stories is, I believe, one of the main reasons that the church and modern conservative interpreters interpret these stories so incorrectly.** When the angels come to Sodom, Lot (himself a stranger/*gur*) shelters them. The men of the town, alarmed by the presence of strangers, shout to Lot, “*Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may (literally) know them.*” (19:5, and Judges 19:22 quotes the men of Gibeah similarly). Some scholars challenge the notion that the Hebrew word *yada`* /to know refers to a sex act here. Then the story is not about homosexuality in **any** way. The men of the town then simply want to “know” whom the men are; i.e. are they spies? They may be correct, and if so, this article could end here. However, the Yahwist author does tend to use this verb for sexual intercourse/activity. Secondly, the fact that in both stories, those trying to protect their guests offer what innocent women they have at hand (Lot’s daughters and the virgin daughter and concubine of the two men in Gibeah...pure victims) to the men of the cities would indicate that *yada`* does indeed imply a sexual act. In fact it becomes a gang rape of the concubine in Gibeah, an act of violence with sex as the weapon. **And this is the second moral of the story.**

Neither of these stories is about healthy sexuality of any variety or about homosexual love in particular. The stories are about violence and rape, not love and sex. Violence, sexual degradation, and rape have been staples of male dominance and warfare as far back in humanity’s history as we can trace, and they dwell with us to this day. The behavior of the villains of our stories have far more connection to the abuses at Abu Ghraib Prison and the alleged abuses at Guantanamo than with gay and lesbian love. **They are not even vaguely about homosexual love or relationships. They are about dominance and rape, by definition an act of violence, not of sex or love.**

Another interesting cultural context is that both stories use their villains to demonize the enemies of David and Israel. **They are both shaped by ideology—the need for propaganda, and this is the third moral of the story.** Genesis 19:30-38 tells us that Lot (his wife dead) and his daughters (without husbands) incestuously mate and produce...Moab and Ben-ammi, the ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites, mortal enemies of Israel. In other words, “*see what disgusting people our enemies are! Their ancestors were born of incest!*” Gibeah, in the tribal region of Benjamin, was the residence of David’s predecessor and rival, King Saul, and the story casts a pallor of barbarity over Saul by virtue of the behavior of the men of Gibeah/Benjamin—Saul and his people look bad, David looks good. Both stories are political propaganda.

There is one final point to which I have already alluded. In their own cultural, religious, and textual context, there is no way Genesis 19 can be interpreted as a condemnation of what we know as gay and lesbian desire, love, and relationships. They are about dominance, brutality and rape. It is for these things, as the summit of Sodom and Gomorrah’s arrogant wealth, that God is said to have judged the cities of the plain.

However, read through the eyes of **our culture**, and its often-subconscious beliefs about homosexuals, particularly gay men, Genesis 19 is “obviously” about God’s judgement on homosexuality. Our society generally assumes that gay men are “ravenous sexual predators, corrupters of boys and men, with limitless sexual appetites” (all words I have found in Christian writers). This was taught by the church for centuries and still lies hidden below the surface of almost any discussions about homosexuality in our culture. Through these modern eyes, then, the “ravenous and predatory” behavior of the men of Sodom and Gibeah is simply “understood” to be the way “faggots” behave. Seen through this bias, **of course the stories are about homosexuality and Genesis 19 is about God’s judgement upon the “perverts” of Sodom.** The details of the story, however, belie this reading at every turn. **The traditional interpretation that God judged Sodom for homosexuality simply cannot be taken from the story if read within its own context.** The adage applies, “*A text out of context is a pretext*”, even if it is a subconscious context or pretext.

**Next edition: Greek Love in Ancient Israel?**

## The Bible and Homosexuality II: Greek Love in Ancient Israel?

[This article is the second in a series of articles examining each of the proof texts from the *Bible* that are used to argue that homosexuality is sinful. Each article will examine one of these texts in the light of current scholarship.]

The Rev. Edward J. Mills III

In this essay I shall address the two passages that are, arguably, the most commonly used passages to condemn homosexuality, *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13*. They read, respectively: *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination*, and, *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them* (Revised Standard Version).

What could be clearer, less ambiguous, and less open to interpretation? Surely, if one regards the Bible as God's Word then the popular bumper sticker that reads, "*God said it, I believe it, that settles it.*" applies. But, does it?

First of all, this text if read literally and applied *only* forbids male homosexual activity, not female. In fact female homosexual activity, if mentioned at all in the *Bible*, is only mentioned once in the *Book of Romans* in the *New Testament*. I will, for now, assume that these two passages might, in fact, condemn male homosexual activity (though I will suggest, by the end of this essay that, indeed, they do not if translated and interpreted properly).

Second, is if one is to take these passages at face value, then male homosexual behavior *must be a capital offense*. The offenders must be put to death for their offence. The Church did, in fact, take this second half of *Leviticus 20:13* to heart for hundreds of years and did execute homosexuals. If, however, we *chose* to not take the second half of this verse literally, then one must explain why the first half of the passage must be taken literally, as well as that of *Leviticus 18:22*. The truth of the matter is that the Church has *always* had to interpret the text of the *Bible* and make the difficult decisions as to which passages it reads and enforces literally and ***the many it chooses not to read and enforce literally***. Once one actually reads the Bible carefully, the adage: "*God said it, I believe it, that settles it.*" is specious. It is great propaganda; it makes a great sound-bite, but it is impossible to truly put into application.

To further complicate matters here, in the passages immediately following these two passages we also find the following commands:

1. *If anyone insults his father or his mother, he shall be put to death.* (Lv. 20:9)
2. *If a man lies with a woman in her (menstrual) infirmity and uncovers her nakedness...; both of them shall be cut off from among their people.* (20:18)
3. *When the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to death.* (21:9)

4. *And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger.*  
(23:22)

Why, if we enforce *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* do we not enforce these as well? Is not our reading of the *Bible* rather arbitrary?

In fact the Law of Moses explicitly, absolutely, and repeatedly forbids usury (loaning money at interest); the very foundation of our current economic system. There is no ambiguity about the Biblical forbiddance of usury, yet we all participate in the practice daily. The Law also explicitly, absolutely, and repeatedly commands God's people to tithe (and much more) from their income, a practice that has been endorsed by the Church, but not widely practiced. It also commands God's people to keep the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) and to violate it was a capital offense. Christians observe Sunday as our "Sabbath" because it is the day of Jesus' resurrection, but I know of no Christian who observes the absolute ban on work of the Jewish Sabbath. The Law also explicitly, absolutely, and repeatedly forbids God's people to consume *any* pork or shell fish (so much for shrimp cocktail or lobster bisque!)

The point here is, that since the Historical Jesus walked the earth in the first century C. E., his followers have *had to*, each generation, make the difficult decisions about what parts of the Law of Moses are binding for all time and which are time bound; which are relics of a specific time and culture. These decisions became matters of great consequence in the English Reformation when the Anglican Church was fighting a dual battle against both Rome and Puritanism in how to interpret the Bible. The *Preface of the First Book of Common Prayer* and the *Articles of Religion* (printed on pages 866 and 867ff, respectively, in our current *Book of Common Prayer*) are redolent with references to these sort of debates which raged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and Articles VII and XXXIV deal specifically with these sort of issues. In short, if, in fact, *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* do forbid male homosexual activity, the Church must decide if and why this prohibition is still binding for "Christian men", using the words of Article VII. I would suggest that *if* *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* do, in fact, forbid male homosexual behavior, the Church must ascertain four things before we make them binding for today's Church:

1. Whether these two prohibitions are explicit, absolute, and repeated enough in Holy Writ to be compellingly clear as God's command for all time.
2. Whether these prohibitions match other similar explicit, absolute, and repeated prohibitions in other parts of God's Word.
3. Whether there are compelling reasons for obeying this prohibition when we do not find compelling reasons to follow the Law's commands on usury, the Sabbath, tithing, and eating pork or shell fish.
4. Why, in fact, if we forbid male homosexuality because of these two brief passages, we then do not enforce the entire text of *Leviticus 20:13* and enforce the death penalty for those who violate it.

I do not believe that we can, in fact, meet the challenge of any of these four interpretive questions, and therefore cannot take the two passages from Leviticus as binding for the Church today.

Beyond all this, I would suggest that *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* **do not in fact prohibit male homosexual behavior in the first place**. I would argue that we have, in fact, mistranslated and misinterpreted them. As I read and re-read the Hebrew texts of these two commands from Leviticus, I read them within the context of the long strings of prohibitions in the Hebrew texts in which they are embedded. I notice something very peculiar about them. They are both couched in very peculiar, very idiosyncratic Hebrew. They are written in a very different phraseology than the sexual prohibitions around them. Literally translated, they should be translated “***With a man you shall not lie with the lying of a woman.***” and “***If a man lies with a man with the lying of a woman...***” respectively. I began to wonder why the author might have worded these commandments in such a unique way and what he might actually be prohibiting. In time, I began to connect them to what we do know about similar things going on another Mediterranean culture at roughly the same time.

I have long been fascinated by the similar and simultaneous historical development of the Hebrew and Greek peoples, cultures, and literature from about the years 1500 through 500 B. C. E. They both emerge from the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age with similar epic traditions and cultures (as different as they also might be). They both are, during this period, transitioning from more tribal origins to more urban, complex cultures; from a more heroic culture to more literate, scribal, and bureaucratic states. Both cultures are defined by their own great epic stories, in Greece “Homer’s” *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and for the Hebrew people “Moses’” stories of the Exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, and Wilderness Wandering and “Joshua’s” Conquest of the Promised Land (In the biblical books of Exodus through Joshua). Both epics relate events believed to have taken place in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B. C. E. Having been passed along orally for centuries these great defining epics begin to be written down at roughly the same time, (very loosely) from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B. C. E. In thinking about all this, I began to wonder if there might be something going on in contemporary Greek culture that might shed light upon exactly what *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* might be referencing. I then made the connection.

We know that male homosexuality was, in fact, greatly esteemed in Greek culture, in fact, it was generally preferred to heterosexual relationships. It was done so in a very male dominated, machismo, status driven culture which also happened to be quite misogynist. We also know that, in Greek culture (among adult male citizens, an important distinction); there was a widely practiced mentorship which older men practiced with younger, post majority, men. They would take on these young men as mentors and that mentorship almost always involved being lovers. The older man was the “active” partner in the sexual relationship while the younger man was the “passive” member of the pair, taking the “woman’s” role, if you will. Eventually the young man would grow beyond this mentorship and would quite often end up similarly mentoring other young men.

There were very few sexual, specifically homosexual, practices that were frowned upon by Greek citizens, **but there was in fact one that was**. This was any older man who continued, beyond the mentoring of young adulthood, to prefer the passive role of homosexual love and sex. That behavior was, in fact, ***quite distasteful*** to most Greek men. It was so, oddly, not because of the act itself, but because it made a man behave like a woman. He was, hence, acting like a woman, a great disgrace for any Greek man in this very status driven society. This distaste for the preference for the passive homosexual role was a function of the machismo, misogynist, status driven nature of Greek culture, ***not*** a comment on any distaste for homosexuality in general. And, in fact, this prohibition fits ***exactly*** Leviticus' odd prohibition of "*a man lying with a man with the lying of a woman.*"

Hence, I would argue, and argue strongly, that *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* do not **in any way forbid homosexual love at all, but only those who to act like women during homosexual lovemaking. They are, in fact, a function of the misogyny of all ancient Mediterranean cultures, and do not have any relevance to any modern practices whatsoever.** As a final note, I am not suggesting here that the Hebrew culture that paralleled that of Greek culture in many ways had a similar high regard for homosexuality. I simply am calling attention to the quiriness of the Hebrew in these two texts that read far more naturally as prohibitions of men acting like women, a behavior that ***we know*** was culturally shunned in the parallel Greek world. Other "female" behaviors on the part of men were also shunned in the Hebrew culture as well. I do not think we have enough textual evidence ***to know with any surety*** what the Hebrews believed about homosexuality. It was either never there or was cleaned up by later scribes. Moreover, any contemporary Greek reader would, however, have read our two passages as commands to act like men, not as commands forbidding homosexuality. I suspect that contemporary Hebrew readers would have as well. Furthermore, contemporary Greek readers would also have assumed that the relationship between David and Jonathan was that of lovers the same way that they would have assumed that Achilles and Patroclus, in the *Iliad*, were lovers. But, what they would have assumed and what modern scholarship can document are vastly different things. We simply do not have the necessary evidence to even speculate about what the ancient Hebrews believed about homosexuality. ***I am sure, however, of what Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are forbidding, and it is not homosexuality in general.***

And this raises the central question about these two passages: Do we really wish to prohibit a "passive", "feminine" role in either homosexual or heterosexual love simply because of an ancient cultural disdain of women in general? I think not. I would suggest we must simply let the commands of *Leviticus 18:22* and *20:13* die the obscure death they deserve.

**Next edition: The Context of the New Testament**

### **The Bible and Homosexuality III: The Context of the New Testament**

**[This article is the third in a series of articles examining each of the proof texts from the *Bible* that are used to argue that homosexuality is sinful. Each article will examine one of these texts in the light of current scholarship.]**

The Rev. Edward J. Mills III

I had planned to focus this segment of *The Bible and Homosexuality* on Romans 1:18-32, one of the three New Testament passages often interpreted to condemn homosexuality. In doing the research, however, it was apparent to me that before I can do that it is vitally important for the reader to understand the cultural context of the New Testament. And, having done that, it is even more vitally important for the reader to read the New Testament within that context—not as a modern document written from a modern context.

This is, perhaps, the most difficult task facing parish priests today. It is very natural to read the entire Bible, much less the New Testament, and assume that the authors were addressing modern issues, situations in our world. But they were not. The biblical authors were all, many of them in the midst of suffering or conflict, trying to articulate their experience of God's love and grace using their own world's cultural images, beliefs, and mores as their cultural backdrop. What, then, were the major attributes of the world that gave us the New Testament, particularly those that might have to do with our topic?

The immediate cultural context of the ministry of Jesus and his earliest followers was Galilean, and then Judean, Judaism. It was a culture brought alive by a sense of God's call to Israel and engaged with Torah and Temple. Many scholars argue that for the vast majority of God's people in that time there was neither the time nor the ability to be faithful to Torah and Temple because they were subsistence farmers, fishermen, and laborers being ground into powder by Roman colonialism. They were often illiterate and on the verge of economic disaster, hence unable to spend much time in religious pursuits. However, the elite and the rest of those both literate and well off enough to afford to be observant created a strongly patriarchal culture fiercely wed to its traditions.

In what we have remaining of this Palestinian Jewish world there is very little mention of homosexuality. In the last century or so prior to Jesus' ministry there was a growing distaste for Greco-Roman sexual mores in Judaism. There were even writers that spoke derisively of homosexuality such as Philo of Alexandria. This is also the first time that we find Jewish texts interpreting Sodom's sin as homosexuality and seeing Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as condemnations of homosexuality. These all, however, tended to be Jews from the Diaspora (outside of Palestine) and they tended to be reacting to the excess of the Roman world which they saw around them. What we have remaining of that Jewish world is found in the *Talmud* (the Oral Torah) and midrashic writings (commentaries on the Torah). There is a slight condemnation of male homosexuality in the *Talmud* and lesbian love is treated as a bit of an open question (as best I understand the *Talmud*). But there is not a constant, scorching condemnation of it. And we have not a word from Jesus about it at all. Some have suggested that Jesus did not speak of it

because all Jews of his time agreed in their condemnation of homosexuality. Maybe so, but we have no proof of this. Perhaps it was just not of interest to Jesus. In the end, that we have no record of his having condemned it is all that we know for sure.

In fact, the most pervasive cultural setting of the New Testament is not Palestinian Judaism, nor Diaspora Judaism, but within a decade or two it was the Gentile Greco-Roman world. This was a rapid and huge shift from the ministry of Jesus and Palestine. The issues addressed, particularly in the New Testament epistles, are almost always those having to do with the separation of the Church from Judaism and with how the now dominantly Gentile Church was to live in the Roman world. And we know a great deal about what that cultural milieu was, first the Greek world and then the Roman one that followed it and adopted much of its cultural heritage.

Greece was a male dominant culture that was driven by the quest for status and honor (of course, we are again talking about the literate elite in Greece and Rome, and the Roman world, particularly, was to a large percentage populated by slaves and the poor). One gained status/honor/glory, as far as I can tell, only by stripping it from another. If one man gained, the other lost; and all of a man's life was dedicated to defending and enhancing his status and honor. Perhaps the best introduction to this culture and its ways are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were for the Greco-Roman world a bible of sorts. The reach for status, honor, and glory found on every page of Homer's *Iliad* exhibits this dominant cultural value. The ten year Trojan War began when Paris dishonored Menelaus by kidnapping his wife Helen and taking her to Troy. In the beginning of the *Iliad* (in the tenth year of the war) the Greeks were barely holding off the Trojan army because Achilles was sulking in his tent and had withdrawn his troops from battle because Agamemnon had disrespected Achilles' honor by seizing his wife/war booty, Briseis. He again entered the war only to avenge the death of (what all Greeks assumed was) his lover Patroclus. Perhaps the most common activity narrated in the *Iliad* is the struggle to strip an enemy's armor from him and enhance one's glory and honor.

The sexual practices of the Greek world flowed out of this patriarchal, stratified society. It was, to a large degree, a bisexual world. *The mores of the Greek world that determined who you could or would have sex with were related to status, not gender.* This is completely different than the modern understanding of homosexuality. In fact, our notion of sexuality, that one has (or should have) a preference for either the opposite or the same sex is a modern phenomenon (the word "homosexual" having been coined by a 19<sup>th</sup> century doctor). Despite what any Greek male's personal desires might have been, his choices were made, and much more importantly he was judged by his peers, according to whether he participated in a sexual liaison/relationship with a person whose social status was permitted, or forbidden, him...not because of his partner's gender. It was a different world than ours completely in this regard. Some men may have preferred men as partners, or women, but the operative issue was whether, in making these choices, the man violated the social order.

In spite of the fact that Plato was negative about homosexuality in his *Laws*, perhaps the best study of the dominance of male love in the Greek world is his

*Symposium* (there is a splendid new bilingual Greek/English version of *Symposium* on the market translated by Tom Griffith). This seemingly contradictory evidence from Plato reflects the entire corpus of writing in the Greek and Roman world about homosexuality. You find it also in Aristotle and many Roman writers such as Martial and Juvenal. But, even with these contradictions, the larger message they bring to us is the variety of ways the ancients loved, again dominantly bisexually. Many men married, but also sexually used slaves (of either sex), courtesans (of either sex), and common prostitutes (of either sex). Many men, married or not, had long, often life long, male lovers such as Achilles and Patroclus in Homer as well as Agathon and Pausanias in *Symposium*.

At the core of Greek male life was what I will call “male mentoring” which the modern world would call pederasty. The word “pederasty” has negative, criminal connotations in our world so I am not using it here because the Greeks only connected shame with it if it was abused by the older male, and never crime. One can learn all about these male mentoring relationships in *Symposium*. It was the way that upper class Greeks taught their male children what it meant to be a man, a man of honor and virtue. An older adult male citizen would enter into a relationship with a boy (say twelve to seventeen years of age) through which (in Plato’s words) the older man mentored the younger boy in “the good”, the good in all areas of upper class Greek life. This mentoring involved being lovers, the older taking the active/male role and the boy taking the passive/female role. The members at Plato’s symposium (essentially a drinking party for men) discuss at length the virtues of this male mentoring and make the point that it is only morally wrong if 1) a boy is “caught” too easily (and did not play hard to get in order to pick a man who would be of virtue and excellence) and 2) if the relationship does not bring improvement to the boy as he grew into a man. This practice, highly esteemed by the Greeks, is extremely difficult for modern readers to deal with, but this difficulty only illustrates the vast differences between the world of the New Testament and our age.

Women in Greece, with some exceptions, had very little honor or status. Hence, beyond the need for family and reproduction, or for those women who men truly fell in love with, there is little in the Greek texts describing the love lives of women aside from their attachment to men. The notable exception was the poetry of Sappho of Lesbos (hence the name “lesbian” for female/female love). Sappho, paradoxically, was not lesbian, but bisexual and wrote of her love and passion for both men and women. The low honor and status of women, in a large way, also determined the norms of male/male love in Greece. These mores, again, all functioned to protect and increase the honor and status of male citizens. A man could have any relationship he wished with slaves, boys, sex workers, or women *as long as the man was the active/male actor and not the passive/female receiver—i.e. as long as he did not function like a woman sexually*. For an adult, male citizen it was seen as shameful for him to be passive in sex like a woman (women being of lesser status), i.e. to be penetrated by anyone, including another citizen. In theory, this tacitly forbade adult/adult male love. Love, however, won out as the examples of the greatly esteemed Achilles and Patroclus in Homer, Agathon and Pausanias in *Symposium*, and many other notable examples illustrate. These men who loved men were often the most esteemed of Greek heroes.

In the mid-first century B.C.E. Greece succumbed to the Roman armies as did most of the known world. However, as Rome's armies conquered Greece, Greek culture conquered Rome. In many ways, Rome's culture, religion, and sexual norms were those of Greece (which is why I wrote so much about Greece above). Greek art and literature was esteemed and copied by the Romans. They adopted, as a whole, the vast matrix of status driven bisexuality from Greece, but struggled with Greek "male mentoring", pederasty. They also shared the abhorrence of passive love for adult male citizens. In fact, laws such as the *Lex scatinia* forbade much of this. In real life, however, these laws seem to have been ignored. In fact, the dominant sexuality of the Roman aristocracy, particularly the Emperors, was overwhelmingly bisexual, if not what we would call homosexual. Writers such as Suetonius, Martial, and Juvenal were scathing in their derision of this, although the last two were also clear about their own similar preferences. Suetonius ridiculed Julius Caesar for his numerous passive and active love affairs, Nero for marrying as both a bride and a groom, and so on. But this acerbic satire of the Roman aristocracy's sex lives most often had more to do with a desire to lessen the honor of these public men than a sincere reflection of Roman mores; with politics than ethics. Hadrian, perhaps the best and most beloved of the Emperors, was a model of devotion and love in Antiquity in his relationship with Antinous, particularly after Antinous died. He could be seen so, at least in part, because Antinous was Bythinian and not Roman, hence it was not seen as shameful for Antinous to be in a passive role with Hadrian. Again, like Greece, Rome was dominantly bisexual. In the aristocracy it was often also what any modern observer would call promiscuous. (See [http://www.glbtc.com/literature/roman\\_lit.html](http://www.glbtc.com/literature/roman_lit.html) for a very good summary of the Roman literary record about homosexuality/bisexuality)

This, then, is the very, very different cultural background out of which the writings of the New Testament emerged. It was vastly different from our own world. There was no understanding of the modern concept of "homosexuality" in this world ("homosexuality" being defined as sexual choice based upon, and sex acts socially judged because of, gender preference), *Hence, the New Testament, technically, says nothing about the modern idea of "homosexuality"* (again, "homosexuality" being defined as sexual choice based upon, and sex acts socially judged because of, gender preference). The authors could not have spoken about something about which they did not know (the modern understanding of homosexuality) nor would have understood. When Roman writers such as Cicero, Suetonius, Martial, Juvenal, and (perhaps) St. Paul condemned homosexual/bisexual acts of other Romans or barbarians (all non-Romans!), *they were doing so in their own cultural terms, because of what they saw as immoral status violations, not in modern terms, as immoral gender liaisons. Hence, the idea of New Testament condemnations of homosexuality is in large measure moot.*

Likewise, the authors of the New Testament may, or may not, have condemned certain aspects of Roman homosexual/bisexual love, but this condemnation also most likely had to do with the level of wanton promiscuity practiced by much of the Roman aristocracy. In fact, it is likely that the first Christians, as did the Jews, found the excesses of the Roman world's sexuality appalling—but that has nothing to do with modern homosexual love. A high demand for faithfulness in marriage (admittedly heterosexual,

albeit often polygamous) was the central sexual virtue bequeathed the early Church by Israel. And the early Church did object to victimization of slaves (I must assume sexually as well) and of human beings in prostitution. It also objected to the ritualized sex/prostitution practiced by some of the Roman religions and mystery cults (thriving in places like Corinth and Rome to where Paul wrote the letters reputed to condemn homosexuality-- Romans 1:18-32 and 1 Corinthians 6:9). *But, again, these condemnations have nothing to do with modern homosexual love.*

Finally, this over-the-top Roman bisexuality, including state sanctioned and taxed prostitution (of all conceivable varieties!...with a state sanctioned holiday for prostitutes!) was in the Church's face everywhere it went. Given this, a very important question arises regarding the New Testament texts. Given how ever-present these Roman practices were (again, for example, in Corinth and Rome to where Paul wrote letters reputed to condemn homosexuality), if the biblical writers really, fundamentally objected to them, why is there not more in the New Testament condemning them (even the two passages referenced were not a wholesale condemnation)? Jesus does not address them at all, but called people to sexual fidelity. But, Palestine was a more conservative place than elsewhere in the Roman Empire. *The three passages in the New Testament (Romans 1:18-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10, to be discussed later in these essays) may deal with some of these behaviors, or excesses in them—specifically, Paul does condemn cultic prostitution and widespread “for pay” prostitution in Corinth elsewhere in 1 Corinthians. Nowhere, however, is there what I would interpret as a condemnation what we moderns call homosexuality (again, “homosexuality” being defined as sexual choice based upon, and sex acts socially judged because of, gender preference) as I shall illustrate in the next segment of this series.*

**Next: Against Nature in Rome**

## The Bible and Homosexuality IV: Against Nature in Rome

[This article is the fourth in a series of articles examining each of the proof texts from the *Bible* that are used to argue that homosexuality is sinful. Each article will examine one of these texts in the light of current scholarship.]

The Rev. Edward J. Mills III

Having set the stage to approach the Pauline literature in the last segment of this series of essays: the **Context of the New Testament** (CNT hereafter), it is now possible to assay Romans 1:18-32 in terms of its contribution to the Church's discussion of homosexuality. I shall begin with a quotation from a New Testament scholar from whom I always learn much, but with whom I often disagree, John Dominic Crossan:

This is my working definition of history: *History is the past reconstructed interactively by the present through argued evidence in public discourse.* There are times we can get only alternative perspectives on the same event. (There are *always* alternative perspectives, even when we do not hear them.) But history as argued public reconstruction is necessary to reconstruct *our* past in order to project *our* future. (*The Birth of Christianity*, page 20. Emphasis his.)

The only way for us to get at what Paul was referring to in Romans 1:18-32, particularly verses 26-27, is this sort of historical research argued in public discourse. This will include alternate perspectives, of which there are several, and what we decide Paul was saying in *our* past will determine what we say about homosexuality now and in our future as those who follow Jesus. If, in the end, there are several equally plausible alternative perspectives about exactly what Paul addressed in Romans chapter one, then we **cannot, I repeat, cannot use this passage to enforce a ban on modern homosexuality and homosexual love/union** based arbitrarily upon only one perspective, using it to the exclusion of the other possible reconstructions of Romans chapter one. In the research on this passage in Romans and about Paul himself over the last several decades I believe that this is **exactly the position in which we currently find ourselves.**

Let us re-read the passages most pivotal in what Paul wrote to the fellowship of those who followed Jesus in the city of Rome in the mid-50's of the first century of the Common Era:

*(26) For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, (27) and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. NRSV.*

What could be simpler and less ambiguous? Paul condemned homosexual intercourse (*degrading passions, unnatural intercourse*) as the situation to which God had abandoned the people described, homosexuality itself being its own retribution. Homosexuality and the numerous sins listed in verses 28-32 are, in fact, the judgment of God on the great

swath of humanity that, unlike Israel, worshiped idols—turning away from the living God. It seems clear...

However, when historians and literary specialists turn their attention to this text, they are not unanimous in this verdict. There are, in fact, several alternative perspectives as Crossan suggests. And I would suggest that we do not now have any way of determining which of these alternatives is in fact the most probable reconstruction of what Paul was saying—and hence cannot use this passage to condemn modern homosexuality and homosexual love/union.

One alternative is the traditional translation/interpretation. The Greek text of Paul is less decisively anti-homosexual. Please note that the Greek words translated *natural intercourse* and *unnatural intercourse* did not necessarily specify natural/unnatural intercourse/lovemaking. They could, but might not. What the Greek literally reads is *regular use* and *irregular use*. What one *thinks* the text is saying often determines how one *translates* the text. Translation of any text is a tricky business. We all do so through our own biases and beliefs about the world and the text at hand. There is an Italian proverb describing this, **Traduttore, traditore!** Meaning, “Translator, you are a traitor!” We all run the risk of being traitors to the text because we translate it the way we believe it should be translated, very often the way it always has been translated. Romans 1:26-28 has, since early modern times, been translated as if it condemned homosexual love/”activity” (as does the NRSV above), but it may not, in fact, have done so at all.

With this broader understanding of the words in mind, there is a very real possibility that Paul is not describing *any sort* of love/lovemaking/intercourse between two people at all, but is describing what he and other Jews and Christians of his time found horribly repugnant, *the worship of the goddess religions in the Roman world*. The best analysis of this perspective may be found at <http://www.jeramy.org/papers/paulcybl.html>. The worship of feminine deities and their mythologies were, between 100 B.C.E and 250 C.E., taking the Roman and wider Hellenistic worlds by storm. Cybele, Artemis, Aphrodite, Demeter and Venus all had major urban worship centers in the cities where the Christians were primarily located, not the least in Rome to where Paul wrote our letter. Corinth had a huge temple to Aphrodite and her associated cultic prostitutes (1000 in Strabo’s day, *Geography* 8.6.20, long before Paul’s time). This was the reason for the city’s wide reputation for sensuality and sexual immortality and the reason Paul repeatedly had to write to the Christian community in Corinth about sexual immorality. Artemis’s primary temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world, was in Ephesus (central to the story of Acts chapter 19). In Rome, the temple of Aphrodite was on the Capitoline Hill and that of Cybele was on the Palatine Hill—both in the heart of Rome’s cultural center.

The worship and veneration of Cybele and her consort Attis, at first shunned and proscribed, eventually became central to the social and religious rites of Rome. Cybele’s image was on Rome’s coins and a statue of her presided over the many of the public games. There were two major city-wide festivals in her honor—bringing out all varieties of cross-gender behavior. In the end, Rome elevated the head of the Galli (Cybele’s priesthood, see below) to the civic post of *Archgallus*. The worship of Cybele (and the

other female deities) involved wild, orgiastic public sexual rituals in which her female and castrated male priests (the Galli) simulated all conceivable sexual unions, most often the women (and sometimes the men) using artificial phalli to simulate anal sex. This was all in keeping with the over-the-top sexuality practiced by the Romans (described in CNT).

This may be exactly what Paul was describing in Romans chapter one. Given that the activity described by Paul is intrinsically tied to idol worship, I would offer that this raises the odds that he was. Idols of humans beings, birds, four footed beasts, and reptiles (listed in that order in verse 23) were all part of the goddess worship of the Roman and Hellenistic world, particularly that of Cybele. Beyond this, the Church Fathers, *seemingly universally*, read Romans 1:18-32 as referring to this worship of female deities, primarily Cybele. Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and the later historian Arnobius all agreed in reading Paul's text this way. Perhaps they knew what we, over time, forgot. They were certainly historically and culturally closer to Paul than we! Further, given the fact that the nouns in verses 26-28 also are "male" and female" (not the expected "man" and "woman"—words describing relationships), see if the passage, retranslated below, might well be read as describing Cybele worship and not homosexual love/intercourse *at all*:

***(26) For this reason*** (their willful abandonment of God) ***God gave them up to degrading drives. Their*** women (the Galli) ***exchanged regular use*** (*normal, procreative sexual intercourse*) ***for irregular*** (in their worship), ***(27) and in the same way also the men*** (again, the Galli), ***giving up regular intercourse with women*** (ibid), ***were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error*** (their own bizarre behavior being punishment enough!).

This reading/interpretation, at a minimum, provides Crossan's alternative perspective. If we cannot decide which translation/reading of Paul is definitive, then we cannot arbitrarily decide that the one we are most familiar with is authoritative and then condemn homosexuality by using it. The stakes are too high.

Say, for arguments sake, that this is not the correct perspective on the text in mind and that Paul was actually describing some sort of homosexual genital activity. What then was it that Paul described as a *degrading drive* (my translation of verse 26)?

Some scholars believe that he was referring to the Greek and Roman practice of pederasty, what I called "male mentoring" in CNT in order to illustrate the fact that the ancients, in general, did not apply the condemnation to pederasty that our modern world does. If that is what Paul was describing, then Romans chapter one does not, in fact, condemn modern homosexual love and homosexual union/marriage—only one manifestation of it that we now know to be a horribly destructive force in a society. But this, then, is the only thing Paul referenced in Romans, not homosexuality in general. This gives the following translation:

*(26) For this reason God gave them up to degrading drives. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for an unnatural desire for underage girls (female pederasty was known, but only rarely), (27) and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for underage boys. These then committed shameless acts with each other and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (again, their own bizarre behavior being punishment enough!).*

The Church Fathers did, in fact, condemn pederasty along with Paul, providing us with yet another alternative perspective--and hence we cannot use this passage to condemn modern homosexuality and homosexual love/union.

More likely, Paul's writing in Romans 1:18-32 must be read with the understanding that what we in the modern world call homosexuality is a category of behavior unknown to the ancient world. For them, with a modicum of personal taste thrown in, the choice of a sexual partner was decided solely along class and status lines. Their sexual choices were based upon, and sex acts socially judged because of, class and status issues. I wrote in CNT:

**This, then, is the very, very different cultural background out of which the writings of the New Testament emerged. It was vastly different from our own world. There was no understanding of the modern concept of "homosexuality" in this world ("homosexuality" being defined as sexual choice based upon, and sex acts socially judged because of, gender preference). Hence, the New Testament, technically, says nothing about the modern idea of "homosexuality" (again, "homosexuality" being defined as sexual choice based upon, and sex acts socially judged because of, gender preference). The authors could not have spoken about something about which they did not know (the modern understanding of homosexuality) nor would have understood.**

If so, Paul's argument in Romans had nothing to do with what we now know as homosexuality and homosexual love. This too provides another alternative perspective to the text and we, again, cannot arbitrarily use it to then condemn homosexuality (as we know it).

Finally, even more likely, as I wrote in TNC:

**... the authors of the New Testament may, or may not, have condemned certain aspects of Roman homosexual/bisexual love, but this condemnation also most likely had to do with the level of wanton promiscuity practiced by much of the Roman aristocracy. In fact, it is likely that the first Christians, as did the Jews, found the excesses of the Roman world's sexuality appalling—but that has nothing to do with modern homosexual love. A high demand for faithfulness in marriage (admittedly heterosexual, albeit often**

**polygamous) was the central sexual virtue bequeathed the early Church by Israel.**

In fact, this is what *I* believe Paul was, in fact, doing in Romans chapter one. Paul was using the sweep of the history of both the Jews and of the non-Jewish nations he would have known in order to illustrate the need of *all* for the Christ event. It was a fairly common belief in Judaism at Paul's time that the nations, like Israel, were offered the Torah of Israel, but rejected it. The nations were then "given up" (same concept as in our text) by God to the slavery of their idols and the concomitant immorality they engender. Verses 18-25 clearly reflect this belief. Other Diaspora Jews or Jews who knew the Diaspora of Paul's time were, in fact, appalled by the behavior of the nations, particularly their sexual behavior. *Wisdom 14*, the *Testament of Naftali 3:4-5*, the *Sibylline Oracles 3.184-86, 596, 764*, Josephus (*Against Apion 2.199*), and Philo (*Abraham 134-36*) all condemn it, particularly its practice of homosexuality, most particularly pederasty. We here begin, for the first time historically, we see the Sodom story in *Genesis* told in terms of God's judgment of homosexuality in order to illustrate how horrid the practices of the nations were.

Paul may, or may not, have shared the abhorrence of some of these authors for homosexuality (*the status driven type practiced in Greece and Rome, not our modern understanding of it as an attraction to another based upon gender*). Or he may, or may not, have shared their abhorrence for pederasty (in fact, I suspect he most surely did). *For sure* he found the excesses of Roman sexuality abhorrent. I believe that he said so in Romans 1:18-32 in order to illustrate the utter corruption of the world of Antiquity and its need for God in Christ. This too provides another of Crossan's alternate perspectives in how to read Romans chapter one-- and hence we cannot use this passage to condemn modern homosexuality and homosexual love/union.

No matter which of these several alternative perspectives one believes is *the most likely* reconstruction of Paul in Romans chapter one, at this point it is simply impossible to say *definitively* what Paul was describing there and thus condemning. If we cannot be in agreement about *reconstructing our past* in Paul's writing in Romans (his intended meaning) there is no way we can project our future by using the text to condemn homosexuality in our time. When one adds to this the *demonstrable fact* (widely agreed upon in the fields of Greek, Roman, and New Testament studies) that, when we discuss the modern linguistic categories *homosexual/homosexuality*, we speak of something the ancients would not have understood, or possibly written about—including Paul. So, the possible use of Romans 1:18-32 to condemn homosexuality and homosexual love/union must be ruled out completely. To interpret it so as to condemn homosexuality would be to do so because one *wants* to read it this way (i.e. because of tradition, discomfort with homosexuality, fear of economic consequences in not reading it this way, etc.). Due to the vast cultural differences between their world and ours, to do so, however, is not an historically possible reading. To do so any longer seems to me to be a highly dishonest use of this text.

**Next: Lists of Vices**

## The Bible and Homosexuality V: Lists of Vices

[This article is the fifth in a series of articles examining each of the proof texts from the *Bible* that are used to argue that homosexuality is sinful. Each article will examine one of these texts in the light of current scholarship.]

The Rev. Edward J. Mills III

Beyond the book of *Romans* (just examined) there are two more texts in the Pauline corpus which are presented, or more properly, are translated, as if they explicitly condemn homosexuality. They are reproduced below in the *New Revised Standard Version*, the words under consideration being in bold text (with the two words as translated in the *New American Bible* in parentheses):

*Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, **male prostitutes (boy prostitutes)**, **sodomites (sodomites)**, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Cor. 6:9-10*

*...the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, **sodomites (sodomites)**, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching. 1 Tim. 1:9-10*

These two words (the plurals of *malakos* and *arsenokoites* in the Greek) that might, or might not, indicate some sort of homosexual activity are contained in two very similar lists of vices that describe those excluded from the Kingdom of God. Though both letters come from the Pauline community in the first century, most scholars believe that only the book of *First Corinthians* was actually penned by the Apostle Paul, the book of *First Timothy* being authored by one of Paul's disciples (though some believe that it is Paul's work too). Thus, it would seem that not only Paul, but at least one of the communities that he formed as well, condemned these two "behaviors". There has been, in fact, no historical agreement about how to translate them. They have been seen to involve some sort of forbidden sexual behaviors, but what that was **specifically** has never been agreed upon. Below is a list of how most of the most historically important bibles translated them:

The Latin <i>Vulgate</i> (4 <sup>th</sup> c.)	<i>molles</i> and <i>masculorum concubitores</i>
The <i>Wycliffe Bible</i> (1395)	<i>letchouris ayen kynde</i> and <i>thei that doon letcheri with men</i>
Luther's <i>German Bible</i> (1522)	<i>Lustknaben</i> and <i>Knabenschander</i>
<i>Tyndale New Testament</i> (1526)	<i>weaklinges</i> and <i>abusers of themselves with the mankynde</i>
<i>Miles Coverdale Bible</i> (1535)	<i>weaklings</i> and

*abusers of them selues with mankynde*

*The Bishop's Bible (1568)*

*weaklinges and  
abusers of them selues with mankind*

As noted above, there has been a **broad** agreement about translation of the two words in question, *malakos* and *arsenokoites* – they had **something** to do with sexual behavior. But within this broad agreement there has been no agreement as to what these sins might have been specifically—be it prostitution, pederasty, effeminacy, and so on. One of the difficulties in positing that *malakos* and *arsenokoites* refer, in any way to, homosexuality, **is this very difficulty** in ascertaining **precisely** what they actually meant to those who wrote and read these two documents. They **are** forbidden behavior, but exactly **what** are “they”.

Far more important than these historically important bibles are the two bibles that have most dominantly informed all of modern Christianity; the *Authorized Version* (the *King James Bible*--1611) and the *Geneva Bible* (1587), the standard of God's Word for centuries of Anglicanism and Reformed/Puritanism Christianity, respectively. They translated the plural forms of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*:

*wantons and buggerers (Geneva Bible)*  
*effeminate and abusers of themselues with mankind (AV)*

These two translations clearly translated *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* to imply homosexuality, particularly *arsenokoitai*. In being so translated they reflected the near mania of the Northern Renaissance European national leaders at the time to eradicate “Sodomites” from their lands. **And they have cast long shadows in the English speaking world and in English bible translation.** They still do in Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christianity. The *New International Version*, for example, translates them as *male prostitutes* and *homosexual offenders/perverts*. The *New American Standard Bible* translates them as *effeminate*/footnoted: *effeminate by perversion* and *homosexual*.

\*\*\*\*\*

What I shall do below is to trace what each word meant in the ancient world singly, what they might have meant when placed together, and draw some conclusions about their applicability to the modern debate about homosexuality.

What did the Greek word *malakos* meant to Paul, the Pauline communities, and the world around them? The first difficulty one faces in translating words from Greek, or Hebrew and Latin for that matter, is that most widely used words are part of what I will call *word clusters*; nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives implying various aspects of a concept. Take for example, the Greek words centering around the root *porn*—(which will appear later in this essay). We have:

*porneia*                      Sexual immorality **OR** prostitution

<i>porneion</i>	A brothel/whorehouse
<i>porneuo</i>	To be (sexually) immoral <b>OR</b> be a prostitute
<i>pornos/porne</i>	A prostitute (male/female)
<i>pornikos</i>	...of prostitution <b>OR</b> the tax paid by a brothel
<i>pornoboskeo</i>	To keep a brothel
<i>pornoboskia</i>	The trade of brothel keeping
<i>pornoboskos</i>	A brothel keeper
<i>pornophilas</i>	One who loves prostitution

This wide variety of meanings from one root, as well as the two directions of meaning that emerged from it (generic sexual immorality **or** prostitution), illustrates the need for care in discovering what possible meanings ancient words may connote in various contexts. The words' meanings might be different given the part of speech used, their context, and the historical era from which they come --- the "**OR**" above is vitally important!

As to the word *malakos* it is used elsewhere in the *New Testament* to indicate the *softness/luxuriousness* of clothing (in a negative sense--see Matthew 11:8, as it was in Herodotus and Thucydides) or *weakness/illness* (Matthew 4:23). The former use goes back as far as Homer. But *malakos* also had a wide range of metaphoric meaning. Aristotle, in the seventh chapter of *Nichomachean Ethics*, spells out in depth what this word indicated when it was applied metaphorically to human behavior. In chapter seven he is trying to define and contrast the human categories: *virtue/arête*, *self-restraint/egkratia*, and *heroic virtue/arête hyperbole* as against *vice/kakia*, *unrestraint/akrasia*, and *sub-human behavior/theriotes*. Within these categories, a person who is *malakos* is a person of no restraint over his appetites, sexual and/or otherwise. It is a person who lives a life of unbridled luxury, idleness, and ostentatious self indulgence:

*... it is plain that men are self restrained and enduring, unrestrained and soft/malakos, in regard to pleasures and pains... (7.41)*

*A proof that (the category)'unrestrained' (when) unqualified denotes unrestraint as regards bodily pleasures and pains, is that we speak of men as soft/malakoi who yield to these...(7.4.4)*

Being *soft/malakos* could involve **any** of the human appetites; that for food, for honor, for beauty, for sex, and so on. If it were for sex, it could have been (using modern terminology which the Greeks and Romans would not have understood) heterosexual and/or homosexual sex (between adult citizens—shunned by some aristocratic Romans), or with slaves (of both sexes), concubines (of both sexes), whores (of both sexes), or with young men (less so with some Romans). The key to being *malakos* was that, whatever the appetite, one indulged that appetite in an unbridled, ostentatious, self indulgent way—in wantonness. *Malakos* was used to ridicule passive homosexuality as did Cratinus in his play, *Malthekoi/The Effeminate*. **But it need not have done so.** It could be used for

men who were wanton in their lust for women, and even for men who primped in order to attract women.

When Greece was conquered by Rome, Greek ways, to the dismay of many upper class Romans, in turn conquered Rome. This constellation of meaning surrounding this root meaning soft-- rolled over to the Latin word cluster:

<i>mollis</i>	soft <b>OR</b> effeminate
<i>molliter</i>	softly
<i>militia/mollites</i>	softness, suppleness
<i>mollitorius</i>	emollient
<i>mollitudo</i>	suppleness, flexibility
<i>mollitia</i>	effeminate

Note that this word cluster also has a literal set of meanings and a derivative metaphoric meaning. It too could have referenced a wide range of ostentatious, over the top human appetites; that for food, for honor, for beauty, for sex, or any other human desire. By Hellenistic times it could refer to effeminate/passive men as against **aggressive females**. It might have referred to passive men with men, boys with men, and male prostitutes (usually passive). **But it need not have done so.** Much of upper class Roman society was given up to this softness, this over the top excess, as pointed out in the last two editions of this series. The best example I can summon of a man who was *malakos* is to quote Suetonius describing the Emperor Nero:

Besides abusing freeborn boys and seducing married women, he debauched the vestal virgin Rubria. The freedwoman Acte he all but made his lawful wife, after bribing some ex-consuls to perjure themselves by swearing that she was of royal birth. He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his house attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife... This Sporus, decked out with the finery of the empresses and riding in a litter, he took with him to the assizes and marts of Greece, and later at Rome through the Street of the Images, fondly kissing him from time to time. That he even desired illicit relations with his own mother, and was kept from it by her enemies, who feared that such a help might give the reckless and insolent woman too great influence, was notorious, especially after he added to his concubines a courtesan who was said to look very like Agrippina. Even before that, so they say, whenever he rode in a litter with his mother, he had incestuous relations with her, which were betrayed by the stains on his clothing.

He so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and

attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust, was dispatched by his freedman Doryphorus; for he was even married to this man in the same way that he himself had married Sporus, going so far as to imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered.

(Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars, Nero*, 28-29)

Here is Nero, *malakos* --- heterosexual, homosexual, and in most all regards. In a closing ironic note about how words' meanings "drift", by Medieval times Aquinas used *mollitiem* to mean masturbation (*Summa 2.2.154.11*) as did most Medieval and Reformation authors.

The second word *arsenokoitas* is a lot more difficult to define. It is a compound word which is a combination of the word *arsen* (man) and *koites* (bed), the original implications of which (perhaps not a sexual category) may now be lost. It was little used (if at all) prior to Paul. It was not used at all in Attic Greek. It is claimed that the *Catlogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum* (3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c. B.C.E.) used *arsenokoites* as an antonym of *malakos* as a reference to active and passive homosexuality, but I have not been able to acquire a copy of it to check it. It is said to have been used there along with the terms *metrokoites* and *doulokoites* referring to those who had sexual relations with their mothers and slaves, respectively. Others believe that Paul invented the term, spinning it from the Greek version of *Leviticus 18:22: kai meta arsenos ou koimethese koiten gunaikeian* (*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman*). As pointed out in an earlier part of this series, this text, though it did not originally refer to homosexuality, by the time of Paul had been widely interpreted in Jewish tradition as a condemnation of homosexuality—Hellenistic Judaism having found the whole range of Graeco-Roman sexual mores abhorrent. As an aside, I would suggest that *arsenokoites* was never widely used is further evidenced by the fact that a word cluster did not arise around its root meaning (whatever that was).

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Finally, the last question at is, "What did these words mean, when used together, as in *1 Corinthians*?" **The point to stress is that there is no general agreement among scholars.** (For my part, I am not sure that they **should** be read as a joined pair of words in this list as many scholars propose). Many believe that *malakos* when combined *arsenokoites*, as in *1 Corinthians*, implied pederasty, what I have called "male mentoring" in a previous article (because the Greeks held no moral qualms about it). *Malakos* would have implied the younger, passive member of the relationship and *arsenokoites* would have implied the older, active partner. If, however, Paul intended to describe pederasty here, one needs to ask why he did not use the far more familiar, traditional terminology such as *erastes* and *eromenos*, among others. Why did he use *malakos*, which had such a wide range of meaning that would have lent itself to misunderstanding, and an obscure word such as *arsenokoites*? Added to this, *arsenokoites* appears singly in First Timothy, which would seem odd if the two words were used together to imply this sort of relationship. If the preceding paragraph is accurate, Paul and at least one Pauline community condemned pedophilia--**but who**

**among us would not?** If *malakos* and *arsenokoites* meant pederasty, then they **do not** forbid modern homosexuality—only pederasty.

Others believe that these two words were used to describe some of the many permutations of prostitution available in the world of St. Paul, particularly in Corinth. Perhaps they described mirroring “ways” of serving as a prostitute. This, I admit, is my view (most of the time). *Malakos* might have described a passive prostitute who sold himself to an active/*arsenokoites* customer—a “John”. Mark Anthony, for an example, served as this sort of prostitute when he was young. These sort of prostitutes, when they grew old, often styled and perfumed their hair, rouged their cheeks, and depilated their bodies in order to keep their beauty, further earning the *malakos*/"Dandy" title in Roman minds. Or they might have been used to describe passive and active prostitutes, respectively, for those who sought either service. If these two words describe some sort of “joined” practices of prostitution, the words that surround them in both lists might become significant.

In *First Corinthians* *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are followed by a standard Greek word for *thieves/kleptai*. In *1 Timothy* *arsenokoitai* is preceded by *pornois*, usually translated fornicators/sexually immoral and followed by *andrapodistais*, translated kidnappers. Consider three things. (1) A great number of prostitutes were kidnapped as children for use as prostitutes. Thus *andrapodistais* might follow *pornois* and *arsenokoitai* in *First Timothy* to add another forbidden part of the prostitution industry. (2) If one broadens the meaning of the word *kleptai* (this is more of a reach), it too might involve a similar activity of kidnapping young boys to sell them as prostitutes. Interestingly, some later Rabbinic thought interpreted the command in the Decalogue forbidding theft as kidnapping—a use Paul might have been aware of. (3) And, if one then (legitimately) translates the category *pornois* in *First Corinthians* as prostitution rather than *fornication/ the sexually immoral* one gets two similar consecutive sets of forbidden behaviors in each letter, both revolving around the prostitution industry, listed below:

*1 Corinthians 1:9-10*

*\*fornicators/the sexually immoral*  
*idolaters*  
*adulterers*  
*passive prostitutes* or *boy prostitutes*  
*“Johns”* or *active prostitutes*  
*thieves (kidnappers)*  
*the greedy*  
*slanderers*  
*robbers*

*1 Timothy 10*

*murderers*  
*prostitutes*  
*“Johns”* or *active prostitutes*  
*kidnappers (of prostitutes)*  
*liars*  
*perjurers*

\*I have translated *pornois*, the first word in the list in *First Corinthians* there as *fornicators/the sexually immoral* to be consistent with Paul’s earlier use of *pornois* in *1 Corinthians 5:1, 9, and 11*. In *1 Corinthians 5:1, 9, and 11* **Pornois must** be so translated; among other things, Paul was rebuking a man having sex with his mother-in-law.

However, if, as is probably true, Paul did not write *First Timothy*, *pornoi* might well have been intended to mean prostitution instead of fornicator, given the words around it. Interestingly the *Vulgate*'s, Tertulian's (*On Modesty 165*), and Clement of Alexandria's (*Stromata 3.232*) very similar use or translations of *malakos* and *arsenokoites* (*molles* and *masculorum concubitores* in the Latin writers) might indicate that Paul did indeed intend to convey *prostitution*—particularly *boy prostitution/pederasty* (some of the Fathers seem to have interpreted it that way until late in the 4<sup>th</sup> century). This translation is surely pertinent to today's world given the enormity of world wide sex trafficking, even in the United States.

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There are several other views about what these two words might have meant, all having to do with prostitution, violent prostitution, violent sexual activity... **But herein is my main point in the consideration of these two passages of scripture. We just are not sure exactly how to translate/interpret them. And there is much at stake here.** Many are adamant that they know for sure how these words should be translated/interpreted, but the variety of opinions in this regard argues that they, in fact, do not. The battle over the issue of homosexuality is so intense that there is little chance of any unanimity for the foreseeable future. I came to this point before when discussing the passage in *Romans* chapter one. If we are not **absolutely clear** what was forbidden here by Paul and one of the Pauline communities, **then surely we cannot, in good conscience, arbitrarily, translate them as if either of them means "homosexual"**. If we do so, we do so because of the long shadow of the *Geneva Bible*, the *Authorized Version*, and the biases they carried from their cultural milieu, which in turn helped to create the current view of homosexuality in the modern Church.

***In addition to this, even if the two lists forbade some sort of ancient homogenital contact—say I am, in this exegetical work, too clever by half-- they do not have any bearing upon what we call homosexuality in the modern world. As I argued in the essay on the book of Romans, "homosexuality" is a modern concept, not one of Antiquity. The modern concept of homosexuality, homosexual desire, and homosexual relationships—i.e. relationships based upon the desire for a person of the opposite sex was an unknown category until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In our terms, many people in the ancient world "were" homosexual, but they would not have described themselves in this way. The loves, desires, and relationships—heterosexual or homosexual-- in Paul's time were driven by other things; by issues of status, merit, and shame. Who one could and should have had a sexual relationship with, who would be a suitable lover, was determined solely by their position, power, and status in the ancient world's social nexus. One may have had personal preferences, but these matters were what was important. To try to equate the two cultures' very different social norms is to compare apples and oranges.***

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I close with a final couple of thoughts. For years I believed that our *Bible* condemned homosexuality. I lived uncomfortably with this because I have been blessed most of my life with gay and lesbian friends. In the current atmosphere in the Episcopal Church I often received a lot of hostility for this belief. The first crack in the dam was when I began to understand that most of the scientific world and **all** of the medical associations (the AMA, both APA's, the AAP, for example) no longer believe that homosexuality is a mental illness or an aberration, but part of the range of normal human variability. And the thought began to nag me, "Of all the times the Church has disagreed with, or fought with, the scientific world---how many times have we been correct?" And I knew the answer—none. For a couple of years this question, and answer, bounced around in my subconscious, until I was challenged to do the research about the *Bible* and what it actually says about homosexuality. In my analysis of the various passages that are discussed in this series of essays, some of my conclusions may be correct, some may be incorrect—time will tell. But I truly believe that overall I am **fundamentally correct** that we have been misreading our *Bibles*.

Secondly, since I have changed my mind on this "issue" (it is in fact not an issue, but the lives of many of our brothers and sisters) I have repeatedly asked myself, "What if I am wrong?" After all, the stakes are very high here. I return and quote the answer I have gotten from the first piece I wrote about changing my mind and that Integrity published:

The final stage of my emotional transformation was the facing of the haunting questions: "What if my motives for this change are base or selfish?" "What if I have changed my mind because of some subconscious need to be loved and accepted by the church, or worse, to receive adulation from the world?" "What if I am not strong or courageous enough to speak the unpopular message of repentance to homosexuals?" "What if I just do not want to hurt my homosexual friends and I have rationalized away the biblical proscriptions against homosexuality?" I have agonized over this and I have found solace in words of Mother Teresa's, "*Whenever we give, we give to Jesus. I'd rather we make mistakes in kindness than work miracles in unkindness.*" **God will, in the end, sort all this out. I hope that, if I am mistaken, it will have been wrongdoing done in kindness. Surely God can somehow use my mistakes, if I am wrong, that are made in kindness. I pray that this is so.**