



The Bible & Homosexuality

As Christians, we look to the Bible for the special guidance that it can give us, in all areas of our lives. So, what does the Bible say about homosexuality? Let's take a brief look at its references, to see what we can discover. First, a distinction must be made between a "homosexual," referring to someone who has a deep-rooted, long-standing sexual attraction to members of the same sex, and "homosexuality," including anything related to same-sex activity, which can even be indulged in sometimes by heterosexuals.

Everyone has heard about the cataclysmic destruction of Sodom (Gen 19:1-29), which was destroyed because the men there had for decades (13:13) apparently been gang-raping travelers who turned into the city at night seeking safe shelter. Lot specifically complains that mob's attempt to molest the two angel visitors will be a terrible violation of the ancient sacred rule to offer hospitality to strangers (19:8). Nowhere in the Genesis story or elsewhere in the Bible, however, is the sin of Sodom identified as homosexuality; this comes later in Palestinian Jewish writings outside the Bible, in reaction to Greek paiderasty (love of boys). (Bailey, *Furnish*) Even Jesus points to inhospitality as the sin of Sodom (Matt 10:12-15, Luke 10:8-12). Patai carefully notes that it would be better to call the men of Sodom heterosexuals (or bisexuals) because they must also have been sleeping with their wives, to produce all of the "young" seen in this thriving city (19:4).

The Law of Moses contains two passages referring to homosexuality. First, "a man [*ish*] shall not lie with a male [*zakhar*] as with a woman" (Lev 18:22, 20:13, NRSV); and second, "None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute" — and, further, no earnings from any kind of secular prostitution were to be brought to Lord to pay off a vow. (Deut 23:17-18, NRSV) Both Hebrew words here for "temple prostitute" mean lit. "holy one," so actually "sodomite" in the KJV does not convey the accurate meaning. The locating of the homosexual ban in Lev 18:22 between a ban on giving of one's seed (children) to Molech and bestiality appears to link all three to idol worship and pagan cult practices. A related, but not identical, triad is found in Exod 22:18-20. (Countryman) Snaith notes the possibility that the children given

over here might have been trained to become male and female cult prostitutes, a practice that was found early, long and wide in the ancient Near East (except in Egypt).

Interestingly, it is an *ish* (ordinary "man") having sex with a *zakhar*, not another *ish*, that is condemned here; and what is the significance of this? One finds that *zakhar* usually appears in OT historical and legal material to refer not just to a "male" (NRSV), but to a *man or male animal specifically dedicated to a deity for some sacred purpose*. For example, it is applied to male animals selected for sacrifice to the Lord, to males dedicated through circumcision to the Lord, and to first-born males (men and animals) in Israel who especially belonged to the Lord. (Cf. Bandstra & Verhey) This ban against homosexuality associated with pagan worship was right on the mark because later we read of repeated attempts made in Israel to get rid of the male cultic prostitutes practicing in the land (1 Kings 14:22-24, 15:12, 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7). Every place in the KJV where we find the word "sodomite," its reference is actually to male cultic prostitutes, who were considered an "abomination" (a grave offense) because they served alien gods. (Furnish) Of course, in a patriarchal society such as Israel, for a male to assume the female role in sex might also have been viewed as intolerable. (Fewell & Gunn)

Turning to the NT, we find homosexuality mentioned in two "vice lists" given by Paul, in 1 Cor 6:9-10 and 1 Tim 1:9-10. He includes *malakoi* (lit. "soft/weak") and *arsenokoitai* (lit. "men bedders") among those "who will not inherit the kingdom of God." These terms have been variously translated, including "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind" in the KJV and "male prostitutes" and "sodomites" in the NRSV. What is clearer here is that all of the terms in the 1 Cor list seem to be related in pairs. (Witherington) In the other list, in 1 Tim 1:9-10, the words appear in triads, including one group which is best translated as "male prostitutes [*pornoi*], their clients [*arsenokoitai*], and the slave-dealers who procured boys for prostitution [*andrapodostai*]." (Scroggs) Looking back at 1 Cor 6:9, we can see that probably the two words here do not refer in a general sense to "homosexuals" (a category and concept that did not exist in ancient Greek or Latin) but also to effeminate call boys and their patrons. (Fee, Soards, Furnish) This view is further supported by the fact that Paul has prostitution heavily on his mind and spends the rest of chapter 6 (v. 12-20) addressing opposite-sex prostitution, apparently an even bigger problem in Corinth.

The main NT passage in this survey is Rom 1:18-27, where Paul condemns homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world, tying it to