

The OT and Homosexuality

In the next fifteen minutes I want to make five points.

1. The OT often refers to homosexual activity – always negatively.
2. The Genesis texts used by Jesus to justify his understanding of marriage – rule out same-sex intercourse.
3. Leviticus bans every kind of same-sex intercourse, not just homosexual rape or pederasty. These laws were endorsed by the Jerusalem council as binding on all Christians (Acts 15).
4. Both the OT and the NT are reacting to cultures that tolerated homosexual behaviour to a greater or lesser extent. This parallels our situation.
5. Indicate some literature which shows these views are not peculiar to evangelical Neanderthals!

Passages condemning homosexual acts.

Let us begin by listing the passages that explicitly condemn homosexuality. They range from the well-known story of the attempted homosexual rape of the visitors to Sodom in Gen 19: 4 - 7, sometime in the era of Abraham about 2000 BC, through the condemnations in the law (Lev 18: 22; 20: 13; Deut 22: 17 – 18), probably the 13th century BC, another proposed homosexual rape in Gibeah about 1150 BC (Judges 19: 22 – 23), the references to male prostitutes in the books of Kings (1 Kgs 14: 24; 15: 12; 23: 7) 10th to 7th centuries BC, Ezekiel (16: 49-50) and Ben Sira's (16: 8) reference to the sin of Sodom in the 6th and 2nd centuries BC. In all these references it is clear that the biblical writers strongly disapprove of the practices mentioned. Nowhere in the Old or New Testaments are homosexual acts approved of.

Leviticus (18: 24 –30) says that the Canaanites were vomited out of the land because of their sexual immorality. This is foreshadowed in the deeds of their forefather Ham. The odd little story about Noah's drunkenness in Genesis 9: 20 - 27 has puzzled commentators: what is going on? Why should Ham be cursed just for seeing his father's nakedness? Or did he do something more than look? 'Seeing someone's nakedness' is occasionally a euphemism for having sexual intercourse with someone (e.g. Lev 20: 17). If this is the case here, it would be easier to understand the curse. For in this case Ham could be guilty of three sins at once, homosexual intercourse, incest (sex with his father) and rape (without his father's consent). This was the way that the Canaanites misbehaved according to other texts.

I am not wholly persuaded of this interpretation. It may be that Ham only looked at his naked father with incestuous homosexual intent, (cf Jesus: 'But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Matthew 5:28 (ESV)) But this makes the same point as the other interpretation even more forcibly. If Ham is cursed, just for looking, how much more serious is actual homosexual intercourse and incest.

The Importance of Genesis 1 and 2

So the condemnation of homosexual acts runs from Genesis to the Apocrypha. But this attitude does not begin in Genesis 9 but in Genesis 1 and 2. Modern literary theorists point out that often an author's key ideas are found near the beginning of his work. If you want to understand his premises and underlying assumptions, read the beginning very carefully. Now as Edith has already pointed out Genesis 1 and 2 are quite explicit about the purpose of human sexuality. The creation of mankind is summed up in Genesis 1: 27:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

As far as Genesis is concerned, the division of humans into two sexes is as fundamental as the fact that we are all made in God's image. But what is the purpose of making us in two sexes? Genesis gives the obvious answer:

'And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth"' (Gen 1: 28). God wants the earth to be filled with creatures made in his image, with human beings. This of course can only be achieved by the union of the two sexes, not by same sex unions. Thus in the first command given to the human race, 'Be fruitful and multiply' heterosexual complementarity is implied.

Genesis 2 makes this point even more clearly. The touching story of God seeking for a companion for Adam is so familiar that we may miss its implications. Obviously God creating Eve out of Adam's rib vividly pictures the concept of one-fleshness that exists between man and wife. When people marry, they find the bit that is missing from themselves. But there is more to the story than this.

Genesis 2 pictures God doing everything he can think of for Adam's well being. He puts him a well-watered garden full of fruit trees. Noting his loneliness God brings the animals to be his companions, but they do not suit. So eventually he creates Eve. But if God was in such a generous mood, why did he not create several Eves? Or even better several extra Adams? According to Genesis this would not have been as good. Monogamy is better than polygamy, and

heterosexuality than homosexuality. Man and woman are complementary: they complete each other.

Before leaving Genesis I should make one final point. For Christians its teaching on sexuality is not obsolete. Jesus explicitly appeals to these passages in establishing his own view of marriage. Just look at these passages again, and see how he quotes these passages to define God’s purpose for the sexes.

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| <p>Genesis 1:27 (ESV) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.</p> | <p>Matthew 19:4-5 (ESV) He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,</p> |
| <p>Genesis 2:24 (ESV) Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh.</p> | <p>[5] and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to wife, and they shall become one flesh'?</p> |

Note too how he takes a comment of the narrator in Genesis as a comment from God himself ‘He who created them...said’. The teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 about sex cannot be dismissed airily, by saying “That’s just the Old Testament”. Jesus himself uses these chapters to define his views, and so should we.

The Laws in Leviticus

The Laws in Leviticus 18: 22 and 20: 13 have already been mentioned. Here I just make two observations about them. First they are very general. Other cultures in the ancient world seem to have tolerated consenting homosexual practice, especially in religion, only condemning it where it involved rape or unequals, such as pederasty. But uniquely the OT condemns both parties, whatever their status, and degree of consent.

Second, the laws against homosexuality are embedded in a catalogue of sexual offences including many types of incest, adultery, bestiality, and also child sacrifice. No one would, I hope, claim that these other sexual offences no longer matter, so why relativise its ban on homosexual acts by saying it is just part of obsolete Leviticus? It is striking that the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15: 20 - 21 seems to be appealing to these very chapters of Leviticus in its ban on sexual immorality. And of course Jesus in summarising the law (Matt 22: 39) quotes Lev 19: 18 ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’, which incidentally comes half-way between the two laws on homosexuality. Is the love-command no longer relevant because it is found in Leviticus? (The NT does discard some rules of Leviticus, such as the food laws, but that is because they symbolised and encouraged the separation of Jews as the only people of God. When Gentiles were

incorporated in the church, this was misleading see Acts 10. With all nations eligible to enter the kingdom, all foods could be eaten. see my commentary on Leviticus pp.181 - 83).

The Bible in its Culture

Finally, let me say a word about the cultures the Bible was addressing. It is well-known that Greece and Rome tolerated homosexual practices, indeed that many Greeks thought it was part of a young man's education to have sex with an older man. (The ancients discussed how far the practices were the result of upbringing or heredity. In other words the classical world was familiar with the idea of homosexual orientation. See Gagnon, pp. 380-95)

The picture from the ancient orient is not so clear, but again there seems to have been widespread toleration of homosexual acts as long as there was consent. 'In Mesopotamia homosexuality is nowhere condemned as immorality. Anyone could practise it freely, just as anyone could visit a prostitute, provided it was done without violence and without compulsion.' (Wenham p.360)

Thus pre-biblical attitudes to homosexuality were remarkably modern! It is one example among many of how so-called modern attitudes are really ancient paganism raising its head again, (other examples multi-faith worship, abolition of Sunday as universal rest day, abortion, cremation, easy divorce). That is why the Bible is still relevant: it spoke to cultures, which in so many respects are similar to our own. We should not be intimidated by the charge of being old-fashioned: it is the so-called liberals who are really taking us back to the dark ages!

For Further Reading

Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Abingdon Press, 2001. The definitive exegetical treatment by an author with a high view of Scripture's authority, but some unconservative ideas on its composition.

.. .. 'Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Inherently Sinful?' in *Christian Sexuality: Normative and Pastoral Principles* (ed. Russell Saltzman) Kirk House, 2003. Unpicks the argument that while homosexual acts are normally wrong, in some cases permissible.

Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, Baker Books, 1996. An eyeopener on the health risks of homosexual practice.

Gordon J. Wenham, 'The OT Attitude to Homosexuality', *Expository Times* 102 (1991) pp.359 – 63.

Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Baker Books, 1998.

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