

The Bible is a book about God—not a book about human sexuality. The Bible is the story of God's love for the world and the people of the world. It tells the history of God's love at work rescuing, renewing, and empowering humankind. It was never intended to be a book about human sexuality. In fact, the Bible accepts sexual practices that we condemn and condemns sexual practices that we accept.

Here are a few examples.

- **DEUTERONOMY 22:13-21**

If it is discovered that a bride is not a virgin, the Bible demands that she be executed by stoning immediately.

- **DEUTERONOMY 22:22**

If a married person has sex with someone else's husband or wife, the Bible commands that both adulterers be stoned to death.

- **MARK 10:1-12**

Divorce is strictly forbidden in both Testaments, as is remarriage of anyone who has been divorced.

- **LEVITICUS 18:19**

The Bible forbids a married couple from having sexual intercourse during a woman's period. If they disobey, both shall be executed.

- **MARK 12:18-27**

If a man dies childless, his widow is ordered by biblical law to have intercourse with each of his brothers in turn until she bears her deceased husband a male heir.

I'm certain you don't agree with these teachings from the Bible about sex. And you shouldn't.

We miss what these passages say about God when we spend so much time debating what they say about sex. If the Bible is the story of God's love for the world and not a handbook about sex, then that should shape how we read the Scriptures. So as we take a look at the six biblical texts that are used by some people to condemn homosexuality, let's ask two questions about each of them:

First, what does the text say about God that we need to hear but might be missing? Second, what might the text be saying about homosexuality?

PASSAGE 1 -- GENESIS 2:21-25 THE CREATION STORY

Let's start "In the Beginning..." What does the creation story in Genesis 1–2 say about God?

We have all seen signs carried by protesters that say: "It's about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." In fact, the creation story is as important to Adam and Steve as it is Adam and Eve. Gays and non-gays alike need to know and celebrate the truth at the center of this story.

This creation story is primarily about God, a story written to show the power of God who created the world and everything in it. It teaches us that ultimately God is our Creator, that God shaped us, and that God said, "It's good." Isn't this the heart of the text? Now what does the creation story say about homosexuality?

Because the text says it is "natural" that a man and a woman come together to create a new life, some people think this means gay or lesbian couples are "unnatural." They read this interpretation into the text, even though the text is silent about all kinds of relationships that don't lead to having children:

- couples who are unable to have children
- couples who are too old to have children
- couples who choose not to have children
- people who are single

Are these relationships (or lack of relationships) "unnatural"? There's nothing said here that condemns or approves the love that people of the same sex have for each other.

PASSAGE 2 -- GENESIS 19:1-14 THE STORY OF SODOM

First, what does the story of Sodom in Genesis 19 say about God?

Once again, this story is not primarily about sex. It is primarily about God. Some people say the city of Sodom was destroyed because it was overrun by sexually obsessed homosexuals. In fact, the city of Sodom had been doomed to destruction long before. So what is this passage really about?

Jesus and five Old Testament prophets all speak of the sins that led to the destruction of Sodom—and not one of them mentions homosexuality. Listen to what Ezekiel 16:48–49 tell us: "This is the sin of Sodom; she and her suburbs had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not help or encourage the poor and needy. They were arrogant and this was abominable in God's eyes."

Today, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike do well to remember that we break God's heart when we spend all we earn on ourselves, when we forget the poor and hungry, when we refuse to do justice or show mercy, when we leave strangers at the gate. Sodomites are rich and don't share what they have with the poor. Sodomites have plenty and want more. While millions are hungry, homeless, and sick, Sodomites rush to build bigger homes, buy bigger cars, and own more property— putting their trust in safer stock portfolios and more secure retirement accounts. Sodom was destroyed because its people didn't take God seriously about caring for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, or the outcast.

But what does the story of Sodom say about homosexual orientation as we understand it today? Nothing. It was common for soldiers, thieves, and bullies to rape a fallen enemy, asserting their victory by dehumanizing and demeaning the vanquished. This act of raping an enemy is about power and revenge, not about homosexuality or homosexual orientation. And it is still happening.

In August 1997, Abner Louima, a young black immigrant from Haiti, was assaulted by several police officers after he was arrested in Brooklyn. Officer Charles Schwarz held Louima down in a restroom at the precinct, while Officer Justin Volpe rammed a broken stick into Louima's rectum. These two men and the three other officers involved in this incident and its cover-up were not gay. This was not a homosexual act. It was about power.

The sexual act that occurs in the story of Sodom is a gang rape—and homosexuals oppose gang rape as much as anyone.

PASSAGE 3 -- LEVITICUS 18:22 AND 20:13 THE HOLINESS CODE

What do the two verses sometimes cited from Leviticus say about God?

Leviticus 18:6 reads: "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female. It is an abomination." A similar verse occurs two chapters later, in Leviticus 20:13: "A man who sleeps with another man is an abomination and should be executed." On the surface, these words could leave you feeling rather uneasy, especially if you are gay. But just below the surface is the deeper truth about God—and it has nothing to do with sex.

Leviticus is a holiness code written 3,000 years ago. This code includes many of the outdated sexual laws we mentioned earlier, and a lot more. It also includes prohibitions against round haircuts, tattoos, working on the Sabbath, wearing garments of mixed fabrics, eating pork or shellfish, getting your fortune told, and even playing with the skin of a pig. (There goes football!)

So what's a holiness code? It's a list of behaviors that people of faith find offensive in a certain place and time. In this case, the code was written for priests only, and its primary intent was to set the priests of Israel over and against priests of other cultures.

What about this word abomination that comes up in both passages? In Hebrew, "abominations" (TO'EBAH) are behaviors that people in a certain time and place consider tasteless or offensive. To the Jews an abomination was not a law, not something evil like rape or murder forbidden by the Ten Commandments. It was a common behavior by non-Jews that Jews thought was displeasing to God.

Jesus and Paul both said the holiness code in Leviticus does not pertain to Christian believers. Nevertheless, there are still people who pull the two verses about men sleeping together from this ancient holiness code to say that the Bible seems to condemn homosexuality.

What do the Leviticus passages say about homosexuality? They say nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today. Here's why. Consider this single Bible passage that was used for centuries to condemn masturbation:

"He spilled his seed on the ground... And the thing which Onan did displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also" (Genesis 38:9-10).

For Jewish writers of Scripture, a man sleeping with another man was an abomination. But it was also an abomination (and one worthy of death) to masturbate or even to interrupt coitus (to halt sex with your spouse before ejaculation as an act of birth control). Why were these sexual practices considered abominations by Scripture writers in these ancient times? Because the Hebrew pre-scientific understanding was that the male semen contained the whole of life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the man's sperm contained the whole child and that the woman provided only the incubating space. Therefore, the spilling of semen without possibility of having a child was considered murder.

The Jews were a small tribe struggling to populate a country. They were outnumbered by their enemy. You can see why these ancient people felt it was an abomination to risk "wasting" even a single child. But the passage says nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

PASSAGE 4 -- ROMANS 1:26-27 NATURAL AND UNNATURAL

This is the most controversial biblical passage of them all. In Romans 1:26–27 the apostle Paul describes non-Jewish women who exchange "natural use for unnatural" and non-Jewish men who "leave the natural use of women, working shame with each other." This verse appears to be clear: Paul sees women having sex with women and men having sex with men, and he condemns that practice. But let's go back 2,000 years and try to understand why.

Paul is writing this letter to Rome after his missionary tour of the Mediterranean. On his journey Paul had seen great temples built to honor Aphrodite, Diana, and other fertility gods and goddesses of sex and passion instead of the one true God the apostle honors. Apparently, these priests and priestesses engaged in some odd sexual behaviors—including castrating themselves, carrying on drunken sexual orgies, and even having sex with young temple prostitutes (male and female)—all to honor the gods of sex and pleasure.

The Bible is clear that sexuality is a gift from God. Our Creator celebrates our passion. But the Bible is also clear that when passion gets control of our lives, we're in deep trouble. When we live for pleasure, when we forget that we are God's children and that God has great dreams for our lives, we may end up serving the false gods of sex and passion, just as they did in Paul's time.

Did these priests and priestesses get into these behaviors because they were lesbian or gay? No. Did God abandon them because they were practicing homosexuals? No. Nor have the homosexuals that I know given up heterosexual passions for homosexual lusts. They have been homosexual from the moment of their earliest sexual stirrings. They did not change from one orientation to another; they just discovered that they were homosexual. It would be unnatural for most homosexuals to have heterosexual sex.

You'll also note that Romans 2 begins with "Therefore, [referring to Romans 1], you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself..."

Even after he describes the disturbing practices he has seen, Paul warns us that judging others is God's business, not ours.

PASSAGES 5 AND 6 -- 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9 AND 1 TIMOTHY 1:10 THE MYSTERY OF "MALOKOIS" AND "ARSENOKOITAI"

These are the last two places in the Bible that seem to refer to same-sex behavior. We can combine them because they are so similar.

Paul is exasperated. The Christians in Ephesus and Corinth are fighting among themselves. (Sound familiar?) In Corinth they're even suing one another in secular courts. Paul shouts across the distance, "You are breaking God's heart by the way you are treating one another." Like any good writer, Paul anticipates their first question: "Well, how are we supposed to treat one another?" Paul answers, "You know very well how to treat one another from the Jewish law written on tablets of stone."

The Jewish law was created by God to help regulate human behavior. To remind the churches in Corinth and Ephesus how God wants us to treat one another, Paul recites examples from the Jewish law first. Don't kill one another. Don't sleep with a person who is married to someone else. Don't lie or cheat or steal. The list goes on to include admonitions against fornication, idolatry, whoremongering, perjury, drunkenness, revelry, and extortion. He also includes "*malokois*" and "*arsenokoitai*."

Here's where the confusion begins. What's a *malokois*? What's an *arsenokoitai*? Actually, those two Greek words have confused scholars to this very day.

After quoting from the Jewish law, Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that they are under a new law: the law of Jesus, a law of love that requires us to do more than just avoid murder, adultery, lying, cheating, and stealing. Paul tells them what God wants is not strict adherence to a list of laws, but a pure heart, a good conscience, and a faith that isn't phony. That's the lesson we all need to learn from these texts. God doesn't want us squabbling over who is "in" and who is "out." God wants us to love one another. It's God's task to judge us. It is *NOT* our task to judge one another.

So what do these two texts say about homosexuality? Are gays and lesbians on that list of sinners in the Jewish law that Paul quotes to make an entirely different point?

Greek scholars say that in first century the Greek word *malaokois* probably meant "effeminate call boys." The New Revised Standard Version says "male prostitutes."

As for *arsenokoitai*, Greek scholars don't know exactly what it means—and the fact that we don't know is a big part of this tragic debate. Some scholars believe Paul was coining a name to refer to the customers of "the effeminate call boys." We might call them "dirty old men." Others translate the word as "sodomites," but never explain what that means.

In 1958, for the first time in history, a person translating that mysterious Greek word into English decided it meant *homosexuals*, even though there is, in fact, no such word in Greek or Hebrew. But

that translator made the decision for all of us that placed the word *homosexual* in the English-language Bible for the very first time.

In the past, people used Paul's writings to support slavery, segregation, and apartheid. People still use Paul's writings to oppress women and limit their role in the home, in church, and in society. Now we have to ask ourselves, "Is it happening again?" Is a word in Greek that has no clear definition being used to reflect society's prejudice and condemn God's gay children?

We all need to look more closely at that mysterious Greek word *arsenokoitai* in its original context. I find most convincing the argument from history that Paul is condemning the married men who hired hairless young boys (*malakoi*) for sexual pleasure just as they hired smooth-skinned young girls for that purpose.

Responsible homosexuals would join Paul in condemning anyone who uses children for sex, just as we would join anyone else in condemning the threatened gang rape in Sodom or the behavior of the sex-crazed priests and priestesses in Rome.

The biblical authors are silent about homosexual orientation as we know it today. They neither approve it nor condemn it.

We've looked closely at the six biblical texts used by some people to condemn homosexuality. But we must also remember that Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and even Paul never even comment on the responsible love a gay man or lesbian feels for another. The Bible is completely silent on the issue of homosexual orientation. And no wonder. Homosexual orientation wasn't even known until the 19th century.

The discovery that some of us are created and/or shaped in our earliest infancy toward same-gender attraction was made in the last 150 years. Biblical authors knew nothing about sexual orientation. Old Testament authors and Paul assumed all people were created heterosexual, just as they believed the earth was flat, that there were heavens above and hell below, and that the sun moved up and down.

The authors of the Bible are authorities in matters of faith. They can be trusted when they talk about God. But they should not be considered the final authorities on sexual orientation any more than they are the final authorities on space travel, gravity, or the Internet. Since the writers of Scripture are not the final authorities on human sexuality, since they didn't even know about sexual orientation as we understand it today, since Jesus and the Jewish prophets were silent about any kind of same-sex behavior, it seems clear that the Bible has nothing in it to approve or condemn homosexual orientation as we understand it.

Although the prophets, Jesus, and other biblical authors say nothing about homosexual orientation as we understand it today, they are clear about one thing: As we search for truth, we are to "love one another."