The Bible and Homosexuality

The Debate Over the Interpretation of Scripture

Even though homosexual conduct is not a major theme in the Bible, certain biblical passages do in fact speak of some type(s) of same-sex acts. The central texts are relatively few:

- the story of Lot and Sodom (Genesis 19:1-9)
- the incident in Gibeah (Judges 19)
- the prohibitions found in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13)
- Paul's condemnation of Gentile society (Romans 1:26-27)
- Paul's list of moral infractions (I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:10)

Traditionally, Christian ethicists have found in these texts a clear rejection of all genital homosexual behavior. However, in recent years a growing chorus of persons has voiced disagreement with this conclusion, arguing that the church has misread the texts. These persons argue that the sin of Sodom and Gibeah involved inhospitality, attempted rape, or even the desire to cohabitate with angels; the prohibitions in the Holiness Code refer to idolatrous sexual relations; and the Pauline injunctions speak about practices known in Roman culture, such as homosexual prostitution. In none of these texts, proponents of this new view of scripture conclude, do we find reference to homosexuality as a natural sexual orientation for some people nor condemnation of its behavioral expression within the context of committed same-sex relationships. In addition, proponents of an affirming stance toward conscientious homosexual persons suggest that certain biblical heroes, such as David and Jonathan, might have been homosexual lovers, and they note the silence of Jesus on this topic.

The Sins of the Cities

Important to the traditional interpretation is the meaning of the Hebrew verb yadha. It's used twice in this passage (verses 5 and 8). It’s also used in in the Judges passage we'll look at next. Generally yadha means “to know” in the sense of “being acquainted with.” But on as many as ten occasions in the Old Testament it carries the idea of sexual intercourse. Apart from these two stories, such intercourse is heterosexual and results in the conception of a child. Thus, the desire of the men of the town in each case was “to know” the visitors in the sense of engaging in same-sex intercourse with them.

Genesis 19:1-9

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. 2 “My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant’s house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.”
“No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.” But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate.

4 Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. 5 They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.” 6 Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. 8 Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.” 9 “Get out of our way,” they replied. “This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.” They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

Judges 19:1-28

A Levite (a man who assisted the priests in worship), his concubine (a female who voluntarily enslaves and sells herself to a man; who did not have equal status as a wife), and his servant were returning from Bethlehem to their home. They stop at the town of Gibeah for the night, expecting some hospitality from the townspeople.

14 So they went on, and the sun set as they neared Gibeah in Benjamin. 15 There they stopped to spend the night. They went and sat in the city square, but no one took them in for the night.

16 That evening an old man from the hill country of Ephraim, who was living in Gibeah (the inhabitants of the place were Benjamites), came in from his work in the fields. 17 When he looked and saw the traveler in the city square, the old man asked, “Where are you going? Where did you come from?”

18 He answered, “We are on our way from Bethlehem in Judah to a remote area in the hill country of Ephraim where I live. I have been to Bethlehem in Judah and now I am going to the house of the Lord. No one has taken me in for the night. 19 We have both straw and fodder for our donkeys and bread and wine for ourselves your servants—me, the woman and the young man with us. We don’t need anything.”

20 “You are welcome at my house,” the old man said. “Let me supply whatever you need. Only don’t spend the night in the square.” 21 So he took him into his house and fed his donkeys. After they had washed their feet, they had something to eat and drink. 22 While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him.”
23 The owner of the house went outside and said to them, “No, my friends, don’t be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don’t do this outrageous thing. 24 Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don’t do such an outrageous thing.”

25 But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. 26 At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight.

27 When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. 28 He said to her, “Get up; let’s go.” But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home.

Some modern interpreters of scripture argue that these passages make better sense if we interpret yadah according to its more general meaning. They say that if we do this we will discover that in both stories the true intent of the townspeople was to establish the identity of the strangers, not to engage in homosexual intercourse with them.

- They argue that Lot exceeded his rights as a foreigner;
- They argue that the sin of the townspeople was that they failed to extend hospitality.

What are the flaws of this interpretation of these events?

In each case the same word yadha is clearly used to refer to sexual relations. Perhaps more telling, however, is the actual alternative the host proposes to the ungodly crowd at his doorstep. Could either of them possibly think his offer of a woman would placate the townspeople if their only intent was to “become acquainted with” the strangers?

On several occasions subsequent biblical writers invoke Gibeah (Hosea 9:9; 10:9) or more importantly Sodom as a negative example. These texts may not focus on homosexual behavior per se. Instead, they paint the wickedness of these cities in broad terms. Sodom was guilty of arrogance, apathy toward the poor, and a haughty attitude, as well as engaging in “abominable things” (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Sodom came to be an archetype of ungodliness, unrighteousness, and lawlessness (2 Peter 2:6).

Nor does homosexual behavior itself lie at the heart of either story. Without a doubt, the sin of Sodom involved inhospitality. But how does the attempted homosexual gang rape fit into this situation? In short, showing utter disregard for the social rules of hospitality, they demand that the visitors submit to the most demeaning treatment conceivable.

But is this the only dimension of the sexual sin of Sodom? We already noted that Ezekiel chastised Sodom for, among other sins, engaging in “abominable things” (Ezekiel 16:50). The Hebrew term (to’ebah) found here is also used in the Holiness Code to describe homosexual acts (Leviticus 18:22). This at least opens the door to suggest that whatever act came to be prohibited under the Levitical injunction characterized the men of Sodom as well.
One additional scriptural text must be mentioned. In a somewhat obscure reference, Jude appeals to the Sodom story as an example of “those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). Here Jude is speaking against godless people who both deny Jesus and turn God’s grace into “a license for immorality” (vs. 4). The specific sins Jude mentions in connection with Sodom are fornication and going after “strange flesh” (vs. 7). And Jude links their example to sinful angels (vs. 6; see also 2 Peter 2:4), whom God has reserved for punishment.

Jude ought to be read as another instance of the type of argument from nature Paul offers in Romans 1. Jude may well be using the angelic cohabitation with humans, and the homosexual practices of the Sodomites evidenced in their intended homosexual gang rape, as parallel instances of the wickedness of violating the sexual order God has placed in creation.

We see that what is depicted and condemned in these texts is violent homosexual rape. But what about homosexual relationships between consenting adults?

The Prohibitions in the Holiness Code

Two explicit commands within the Law provide traditionalists with the clear answer to this question of consensual homosexual relationships between adults. The first forthrightly prohibits male-to-male sexual intercourse (Leviticus 18:22). And the second prescribes the death penalty to offenders (Leviticus 20:13).

The commands occur within a lengthy section containing injunctions for personal and family conduct within the context of God’s covenant people. This section is called the Holiness Code because the various precepts flow out of the central command: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God and holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Thus, a holy God desires that the covenant people also be holy. They must abstain from certain practices that characterize the surrounding nations, as well as the Canaanites who had inhabited the land (Leviticus 18:1–4, 24–28). One crucial dimension of such holiness is proper sexual conduct (Leviticus 18:5–23). And sexual propriety, traditionalists conclude, precludes homosexual behavior.

Leviticus 18:22

“Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

Leviticus 20:13

“If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.”

Today the traditional understanding of these texts is under attack. Some would say that these texts do not condemn homosexuality as we know it today, but instead, they warn Israel against a certain specific type of activity found in the ancient world – namely, same-sex acts associated with idolatry (male-cult prostitutes). This understanding leads some to conclude that the injunction against homosexual acts is not an ethical but rather a ceremonial prohibition.
But the Holiness Code presents everything Yahweh prohibits as a matter requiring due seriousness. It is difficult to get around the conclusion that the Holiness Code prohibits homosexual acts in general and that it did so on the basis of concerns that were at least in part moral. But why did the Hebrews view such behavior as abhorrent?

The second of these texts stipulates the punishment of death for both participants. If this was referring to a forced act, we would expect that only the perpetrator of the affront to the dignity of the other should bear the punishment. So we are left searching for a deeper understanding of this prohibition. It may well be that the prohibition is grounded not only in the connection to idolatry, but also creation. Such acts violated the created order of male and female and are to‘ebah: they are an idolatrous affront to the integrity of God.

These commands suggest that an even more central, albeit related, theme is at work here. The injunctions of the Holiness Code regulating sexual behavior appear to have as their intention the safeguarding and preservation of the marital context in which sexual acts are to occur. Old Testament morality concerning sexual relationships is in basic principle committed to the defense of family and married life, and everything outside it is seen as a threat and an outrage, an abomination not to be permitted in Israel.

One additional question remains:

**To what extent does the prohibition of homosexual behavior continue to have binding authority into the present?**

Many people argue that consistency demands that we reject whatever injunctions against homosexual acts we find in the law is no longer valid. To this end, they remind us, that we exempt ourselves from many of the commands in the Holiness Code (such as the ban on intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period and the injunction of wearing clothes made from different types of cloth.) And they point out that people would no longer demand the death penalty for homosexual activity.

But to reject the moral teaching of the text on this basis fails to understand why the Holiness Code stipulated the death penalty for certain acts and why that stipulation is no longer in force. At the heart of these chapters of Leviticus is the warning that Israel’s disobedience will defile the land, and as a consequence it will “vomit” them out, as it did with the former inhabitants (Leviticus 18:24-30). With a view toward this dire threat, the Holiness Code provides a way for the people as a whole to separate themselves from those who transgress the laws. Thereby they are able to purge themselves of corporate responsibility for the offenses of the few and avoid the awful fate that disobedience would otherwise bring upon them. Further, under the Old Covenant the severity of the penalty was an indication of the importance of the precept.

**Paul’s Critique of Pagan Society**

Without a doubt, the central biblical text around which the contemporary debate over homosexuality revolves is Paul’s condemnation of same-sex relations found within the context of his critique of the pagan society of his day. Traditionalists see in these verses a clear New Testament confirmation and expansion to females of the prohibition of male-to-male intercourse articulated in the Holiness Code.
Here, they contend, the apostle forthrightly declares that all forms of same-sex genital behavior are immoral. This interpretation of Paul's words is hotly contested today.

**Romans 1:26-27**

_Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error._

Some persons today downplay the importance of these verses saying they are incidental to Paul's main point in Romans 1:18-3:20. It is correct that he devotes little space to such acts – two verses in a lengthy letter. Yet his statement is hardly incidental. Romans 1 includes a much longer list of vices which intimate the general corruption of society, but it is still true that homosexual practice is particularly highlighted.

Some contemporary objections to the traditional view of these verses are:

1. Paul wasn't voicing a blanket rejection of homosexual acts, but were aimed at the specific practice in the Roman Empire of temple prostitution, more likely pederasty (homosexual relations between an adult and a youth).

   **Reply:**
   While Paul could include pederasty in his condemnation, he speaks of the behavior in general terms, “males with males”, not “men with boys.” Paul also includes reference to “females” who “exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones” (v. 26). Most interpreters today agree that he is referring to lesbian behavior.

2. Paul was condemning “perverts” rather than “inverts.” This objection says Paul was condemning heterosexual persons who by engaging in homosexual behavior were acting against their own nature. This view says he wasn't thinking about persons who find in themselves a “natural” homosexual preference (inversion) and who as a result enter into loving, stable homosexual relationships, a situation about which the apostle supposedly knew nothing.

   **Reply:**
   Paul did not have in mind the personal life histories of some specifiable group. One clue lies in the wording he uses. He does not state these people changed their natural, but the natural sexual functioning. This also indicates that in Paul’s mind there is a natural way as well as an unnatural way to have sexual relations and that the standard is not merely the preference of the individual himself or herself.

   Further, the verse doesn’t speak of natural and unnatural _feelings_, but natural and unnatural _function_. Paul doesn't suggest that the morality of sexual acts is to be judged on the basis of the inner disposition of the person, but in accordance with what he considered to be our “natural” functioning as humans.
3. Paul is not drawing his own moral conclusions but summarizes the typical Hellenistic Jewish picture of Gentile society, and in so doing lays the foundation for Paul’s subsequent attack on Jewish hypocrisy. To this end he avoids describing homosexual acts as sinful. Instead he speaks of such behavior as “unclean.”

Reply:
It appears that Paul did consider the same-sex genital behavior prevalent in his day, whether between males or females, to be morally condemnable because such acts were “unnatural.”

But this raises the crucial question: On what basis did the apostle come to this conclusion? What does Paul mean by “nature”? What leads Paul to assert that heterosexual intercourse is “natural” whereas homosexual behavior is “unnatural”?

Paul’s writings repeatedly indicate his foundational standard for human conduct lay in God’s ultimate purpose of humankind. Therefore we ought to view Paul’s concept of “nature” as a broad idea that refers to the world and human life as intended by God, so that conversely everything that runs contrary to God’s intention is “unnatural.”

In his critique of homosexual acts as practiced in Gentile society, Paul is upholding as his standard God’s intention for woman and man. In keeping with the injunctions of the Holiness Code, the apostle declared that this model is natural, for it alone fits with the Creator’s design for sexual activity. Homosexual relations, whether between men or women, are “against nature,” because they are contrary to this divine intent. And for Paul it comes as no surprise that in an idolatrous culture, which sacrifices the truth of God, homosexual acts would emerge.

Paul’s Rejection of Same-Sex Acts

In Romans 1, Paul spoke of homosexual behavior in the context of a forceful critique of Gentile society. In the two other texts he singles out certain specific acts. Both references occur in the context of a short list of sins.

I Corinthians 6:9

*Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men*

I Timothy 1:9-10

*We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine*
It seems clear that Paul is speaking against any type of male-to-male intercourse. He was convinced that the only proper context for sexual intercourse was heterosexual marriage.

**The Silent Texts**

Some people suggest that a few seemingly silent texts in fact speak volumes on this issue.

**The Story of David and Jonathan**

One attempt to let the silent texts speak involves the search for the presence of homosexual relationships within the narrative of ancient Israel. The strongest candidate is the close bond between David and Jonathan. The central text that leads to speculation that theirs was a story of homosexual love comes in David’s lament after the death of his friend.

**2 Samuel 1:26**

*I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.*

Even though there is no explicit mention of a sexual relationship in the biblical text, some say that there is a possibility that the original narrative was altered, editing out any explicit homosexual relationship between the two. Yet, despite various attempts to uncover a deeper-lying story of homosexual love, most scholars remain unconvinced. Whatever feelings David and Jonathan had for each other, both were definitely heterosexual in behavior, for both were married and fathered children. And rather than looking for a tone that fits with modern homosexuality, several scholars suggest that we are closer to the story if we view the language it uses to describe their relationship as typical of the treaty terminology of the day.

**Jesus’ Silence and Its Significance**

Perhaps more significant to the discussion is what from one perspective appears to be the enigmatic stance of Jesus on this matter. Proponents of an affirming stance toward homosexual love today suggest that this silence indicates that our Lord did not find this issue at all important. Further, they point out that on the occasions when Jesus could have legislated against homosexual conduct, namely, when he mentioned Sodom, he chose to speak instead of inhospitality (Matthew 10:12-15; Luke 10:10-12) and unbelief (Matthew 11:23-24). Finally, some even see hints in the story of the healing of the centurion’s servant (Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) and in Jesus’ statement about eunuchs (Matthew 19:10-12) that our Lord was not at all hostile to persons who had had homosexual relationships.

While we shouldn’t dismiss these too quickly, arguments from silence are notoriously difficult to substantiate. We might just as easily conclude that other acts about which Jesus was silent were equally unimportant to the Master. For example, does his silence about incest mean that we are no longer bound to the Old Testament prohibitions in this area? It would seem that the same logic might demand that we affirm loving, committed relationships between a brother and a sister.

But why Jesus’ silence? One possibility is that homosexual behavior was simply not a major problem in first-century Palestine. The mainstream of rabbinical literature did not tend to speak of the sin of Sodom as homosexual acts, in contrast to the writings of those Jews who faced the potential inroads of Greek practices. Jesus appears to stand more in this dominant Jewish tradition.
Perhaps this was to a great degree because the conflicts out of which much of his teaching arose, especially as it pertained to his attempt to interpret the Hebrew scriptures correctly, were almost exclusively with the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Jewish enclave of Palestine.

Jesus did speak about the proper expression of human sexuality, however. He condemned sexual immorality, which he differentiated from adultery (Mark 7:21).

What Jesus meant by immorality we can only conjecture. But nowhere did he condone genital sexual activity outside the context of a lifelong heterosexual commitment. In fact, the only option he mentioned other than marriage was celibacy (Matthew 19:11-12). Moreover, whenever Jesus engaged with questions involving human sexual conduct, he appealed to God’s intention in creation (e.g. Mark 10:11-12; Matthew 19:4-9).

**Conclusion**

Recent exegetical discussions of biblical literature have deepened our understanding of the ancient world and have given us deeper insight into the texts that mention homosexual acts. Nevertheless, scholars who propose that the church accept committed same-sex relationships have yet to produce a sufficient basis for revising the traditional belief that the biblical writers condemned homosexual conduct, at least as they had come to know it.

Robin Lane Fox, who favors a more open stance, offered this conclusion:

*As for homosexuality, Paul and the early epistles agreed with the accepted Jewish view that it was a deadly sin which provoked God’s wrath. It led to earthquakes and natural disasters, which were evident in the fate of Sodom. The absence of Gospel teaching on the topic did not amount to tacit approval. All orthodox Christians knew that homosexuals went to hell, until a modern minority tried to make them forget it.*