

Being Gay Is Not A Sin. **Period.**

The Bible and Sexuality: Believers Take a Fresh Look

- Pastor Jim O'Hanlon

Summary:

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah has been interpreted as a condemnation of homosexuality but it does not say that. The story is NOT about two men or two women who are lovers or who want to marry. It is about a mass rape of two wayfarers. Lot seeks to protect them and puts himself and his daughters at risk. (Genesis 19:1-11)

Leviticus 19 calls for the ultimate punishment for "*a man (who) lies with a male*" but it is part of a list of nearly 30 other rules many also insisting on the ultimate punishment of death. Looking at the list we realize these need to be studied and evaluated in light of today's values. The same goes for portions of the Letter to the Romans and St. Paul's exhortations to morality. Let's read each of these.

Many people say our understanding of homosexuality can be dictated by the Bible. They start with the first book of the Bible and a truly horrendous story:

Genesis 19:1-11 The Depravity of Sodom

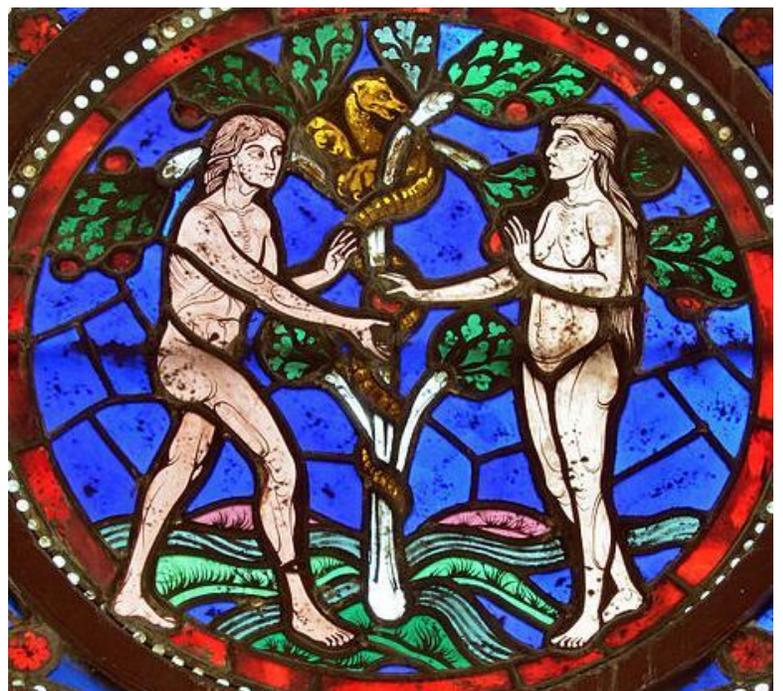
"The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise *early and go on your way.*' They said, 'No;

we will spend the night in the square.' ³But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house... ⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But they replied, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. ¹⁰But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. ¹¹And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door."

Should we narrowly define this as a story about the evils of homosexuality? To be able to define this (narrowly or otherwise) we would have to look at the demand of the men of Sodom. We see the story is about rape --

mass rape -- and deserves to be noteworthy for the revulsion it creates in us but if the story was instead about heterosexual mass rape would we be less appalled? Which is the more relevant aspect, sexuality or violence? How is the story relevant to the discussion about letting two consenting same sex adults get married? The Bible itself refers back to this story and defines it as being about hospitality. In Ezekiel 16:48-50 God compares Jerusalem to Sodom, saying "Sodom never did what you and your daughters have done." He explains that the sin of Sodom was that they "were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me." Jeremiah 23:14, Jeremiah 49:17-18, Jeremiah 50:39-40 and Lamentations 4:6 each associate Sodom and Gomorrah with adultery and lies.

Lot's response to the demands of the city is to protect the travelers at all costs, even to offer his daughters to the sociopathic lust of the entire city. Should we take this story as the definition of our values and accept its principles? If so we would start by removing ALL the rights of women and tell our daughters they are expendable. Daughters were sold into a marriage for the cost of livestock.



While the story of Sodom does not refer to sexual orientation by itself or make any statements about what is acceptable or not in that respect, other books of the Bible will explicitly condemn homosexual behavior among men. The Bible has less to say about lesbianism.

The Bible never uses the term “homosexual” because that term is a modern one. There are passages that discuss sexual behavior between the same gender but this may or may not be referring to homosexuality as we would understand it. One such reference is Leviticus 19:19 - 20:16:

Ritual and Moral Holiness

¹⁷ *"You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.*

¹⁸*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

¹⁹ *You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.*

²⁰ *If a man has sexual relations with a woman who is a slave, designated for another man but not ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held. They shall not be put to death, since she has not been freed; ²¹ but he shall bring a guilt-offering for himself to the LORD, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram as guilt-offering... ²³ When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall*

regard their fruit as forbidden; for three years it shall be forbidden to you; ...

²⁶ *You shall not eat anything with its blood. You shall not practice augury or witchcraft. ²⁷You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. ²⁸You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.*

²⁹ *Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute, so that the land may not become prostituted and full of depravity. ³⁰You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD.*

³¹ *Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.*

³² *You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.*

³³ *When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

³⁵ *You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity... ²⁰*

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²Say further to the people of Israel:

Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death....

⁴*And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molech, and do not put them to death, ⁵I myself will set my face against them and*

against their family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech...

⁹All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, their blood is upon them.

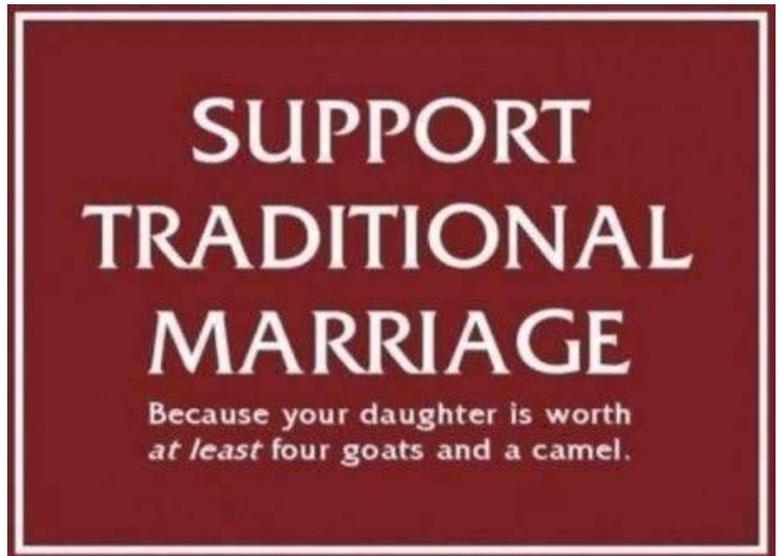
¹⁰ If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. ¹¹ The man

who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. ¹²If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them. ¹³If 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"

Many of the rules and laws of Leviticus are otherwise considered common sense to us and others have long since been dismissed based on a rational view, reconsidered as no longer necessary or rejected as barbaric. Why have Bible verses about homosexuality been treated differently as if we cannot consider their wisdom? How do we insist on imposing Biblical judgment against homosexuality while ignoring many if not most others?

What did Jesus think about the book of Leviticus? When he was asked what the most important commandment was he gladly pared down the Bible's 600 commandments to one. Deuteronomy 6: "Love God with all your heart and mind and soul." He offered a second commandment to go with it and this one was from Leviticus 19: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

How do we pick and choose what is important in the Bible? Jesus already did it for us.



Romans 1:18-2:1 & 3:21-24

The Guilt of Humankind

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth... ²¹(F)or though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and 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.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind

and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents,³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.³²They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

2 ¹ Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

3 ²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

A few questions regarding the letter to the Romans:

- * How many behaviors are condemned?
- * What do we think about the penalty for these behaviors?
- * Which of these behaviors do we continue to reject and which penalties would we apply?

Many people discuss these verses with an “all or nothing” mentality: They say you cannot disregard what the Bible says about homosexuality without offending God but we do not apply this rule to all other topics in the Bible. Why this one? Jesus makes no statement about sexuality but is clear about his feelings against divorce. Most of us are capable of putting comments about divorce into a context of 2000 years ago and can then make adjustments. After all, Jesus updated the understanding of divorce for his time to make it a decision available to women as well as men.

Didn't Jesus say that we his children are more important than the rules of the Bible? “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” (Mark 2:27)

Didn't he speak of forgiveness, love and compassion? While not saying anything about homosexuality, Jesus, and indeed the entire Bible, speaks volumes about help for the poor, the sick, the excluded. The Story of Sodom challenges us to welcome foreigners into our home, as do many other portions of the Bible. Lot stands alone against an entire community in affirming what he thinks is right. After reading that story should we make picket signs reading “God Hates Gays” or rather “God Loves Foreigners”?

There are many people who take the Bible seriously as the word of God but are able to interpret it and allow for varying individual lessons and insights. The Bible is an interesting place to begin a discussion and indeed is helpful in the moral and spiritual insights it inspires. The Bible is not helpful to close a conversation if you are looking for something to prove who is right. We can take the Bible seriously without taking it literally in every instance. Jesus himself showed how we don't just read the plain text, we interpret: “Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’”²⁶ He said to him, ‘What is

written in the law? How do you read it?’ (Luke 10:25-26)

So then we don't just recite the words, we explain what it means to us. Jesus seldom gives a straight answer. When Jesus is questioned he replies with his own questions (over 300 of them) and he often tells a story which we then have to consider, discuss and apply. In different parts the Bible itself gives different answers. As we read it and seek to find prayerful consensus we can come to decisions which give us norms and rules for behavior, but as we return to the book again in a different day we can seek to apply the same principles in different ways at different times. We always fall short of its teachings.

In the New Testament, placing the letter of the law above the spirit is described as hypocrisy (Mark 2:3–28, 3:1–6). Paul's letter to the church in Rome explains the freedom we have in applying God's teachings so that we follow it “in the spirit, and not in the letter.” (Second Chapter) The Spirit is not such a fixed thing and we should not try to make it so. “The Spirit blows where it will...” (John 3) and we are cautioned by Paul, “Do not quench the Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 5)

The Bible is a source of guidance for many things but it does not have a single voice and it certainly does not have a single voice with regard to sexual ethics. There is no one version or view of marriage that is modeled. Love is about more than sexual partners. There are descriptions of loving committed relationships between two males (1 Samuel 20:4), between a woman and her mother-in-law (Ruth) and between people joined in common cause.

The Bible is a source of inspiration but it is not a one size fits all blueprint. It is not a book in the normal sense but rather an individual dialogue with God. We must take it up expecting to hear something new.

Acknowledgements

These Scripture portions and the questions that follow were developed in collegial discussions for a Bible Study in Port Chester conducted jointly between Lutheran, Presbyterian and Conservative Jewish congregations in the Autumn of 2013. It has subsequently been used for other groups including sensitivity training for Police Departments in Westchester County and the Lutheran Summer Conference. The first text, Genesis 19 was used for a discussion with 60 High School students at “PrideWorks”, the 15th Annual Conference for LGBTQ youth and allies in Westchester County.

Rabbi Jaymee Alpert joined Congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel in Port Chester, NY during the summer of 2005. She is passionate about Jewish life and strives to create a warm, inviting atmosphere, where people from all backgrounds are welcome, and all questions are valid. In addition to serving as the spiritual leader of Congregation KTI, Rabbi Alpert is the immediate past president of the Westchester Board of Rabbis, a member of the Rabbinical Assembly, and serves as a chaplain for the Port Chester Fire Department. She has chaired several initiatives in partnership with UJA-Federation of Westchester, is currently a member of the Blind Brook Community Coalition and the Port Chester Board of Ethics, is a founding member of the Port Chester Interfaith Clergy Group, and has participated in a number of leadership programs.

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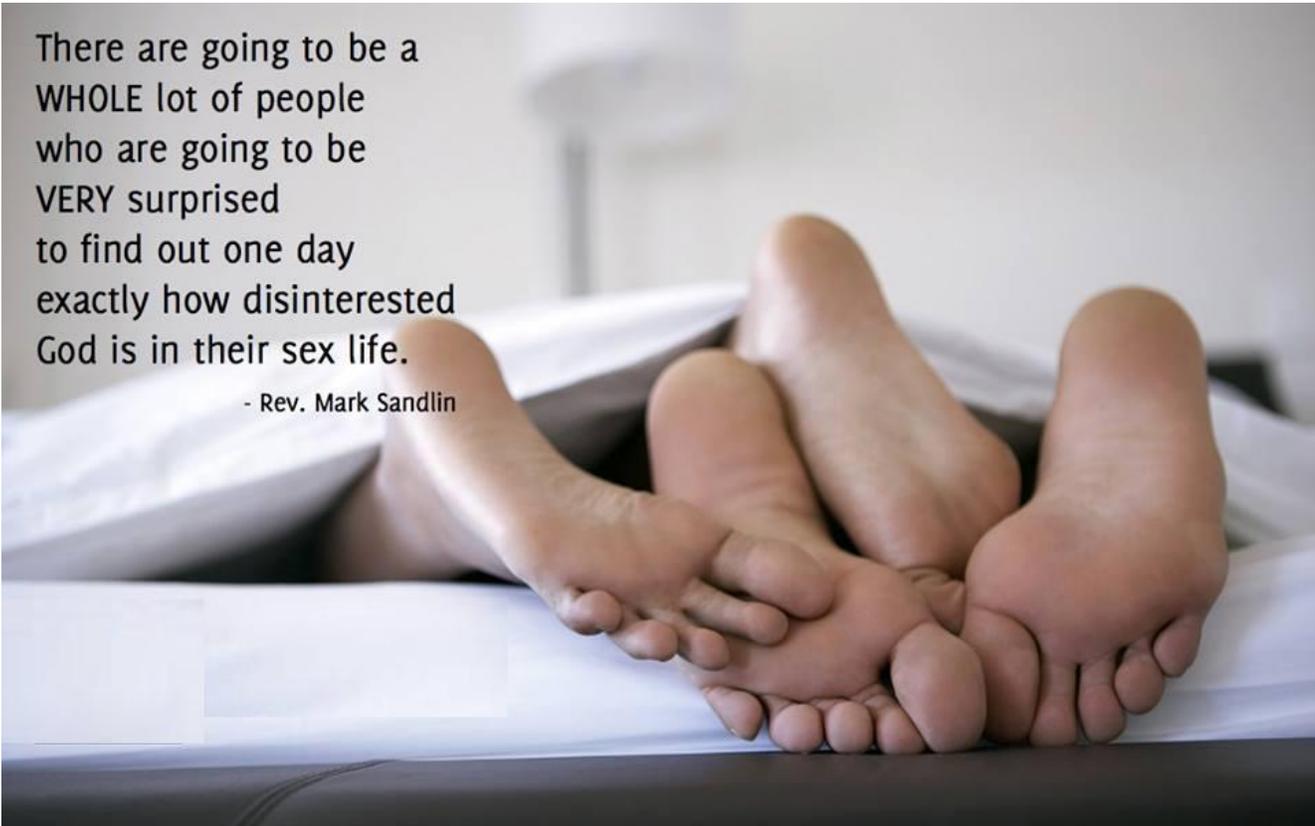
Jim O’Hanlon has been a Pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since 2000, of St. Paul’s since 2010 and is the current president of the Council of Community Services of Port Chester and Rye Brook. He has served Lutheran ministries in Manhattan, the Bronx and Westchester as well as one year on the staff of a congregation of the United Church of Christ.

Raised in a large, Irish, Roman Catholic family he has a keen interest in the liturgical, social and church reforms that began with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. After college he earned a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in NYC and subsequently a Master of Sacred Theology from the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Jim was as an adjunct professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Bergen Community College in New Jersey for three years, teaching courses such as "World Religions." He completed several graduate courses in Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University and has actively collaborated with colleagues of various faiths.

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There are going to be a
WHOLE lot of people
who are going to be
VERY surprised
to find out one day
exactly how disinterested
God is in their sex life.

- Rev. Mark Sandlin



I think this goes too far.
Many people seem to think
religion should retreat altogether
from discussions about sexual
morality. The above photo is one
example to which I take exception.

God IS very interested and
concerned and present in the hope
that we experience love and
intimacy. God IS concerned about
victims of abuse. God is NOT
disinterested. God wants everyone,
gay and straight, to have
responsible relationships and to be

emotionally, sexually, spiritually,
and vocationally fulfilled.

Similarly God is not color-blind or
impartial. God enters into very
specific relationships and does not
try to wash away or remove the
diversity God deliberately created.

-Jim

Does God Hate Shrimp? When Biblical Citation Goes Awry

By [Emily A. Filler](#) | August 5, 2014



(Gautham Narayan/Flickr)

One of the most popular “West Wing” clips on YouTube is President Josiah Bartlet’s biblically-based [takedown](#) of a conservative radio talk-show host (a thinly veiled Dr. Laura), who confidently justifies her opposition to homosexuality by citing the Hebrew Bible.

Specifically, she refers to a so-called “clobber verse,” Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.” In response, the

popular fictional president excoriates her by asking questions about other verses surrounding this passage. “Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? ... Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?” His pointed questions leave his interlocutor speechless. This rhetorical theme isn’t limited to television. In 2006, then-Senator Barack Obama [addressed](#) a conference hosted by the Christian social justice organization Sojourners. In addition to describing his own spiritual journey, Obama also questioned the biblical invocations of conservative leaders, asking, “Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is ok and that eating shellfish is abomination?”

Among current debates in the American public square, perhaps

none are more contentious and biblically inflected than arguments over same-sex marriage and related civil rights. The Hebrew Bible book of Leviticus is central to these debates. Opponents of gay rights visibly couch their argument in biblical terms, and their picket signs commonly feature Leviticus 18:22 and other “clobber” passages, as well as broad theological statements on God’s behalf. Members of the Westboro Baptist Church—whose leader, the Reverend Fred Phelps, just died in March—are famous for their simple, memorable, and memorably hateful posters: “God hates fags.” More recently, however, proponents of gay civil rights have been doing some biblical counter-citation of their own. In addition to theological statements like those made by President Obama, or the recent [book](#) or [videos](#) by Christian author and LGBT activist Matthew Vines, rejections of Leviticus are showing up at demonstrations as well. Rare is the public protest that doesn’t feature at least a few members of the public, including plenty of Christians, holding signs

declaring what *other* abominations God hates: clothing made of mixed fibers (Leviticus 19:19), pork (Leviticus 11:7), and the aforementioned shellfish (Leviticus 11:9-12). There’s a whole [website](#) devoted to this theme, with questions like, “Shrimp, crab, lobster, clams, mussels, all these are an abomination before the Lord, just as gays are an abomination. Why stop at protesting gay marriage?”

Let’s call this rhetorical move the “argument by shrimp.” It may be easy to see why this line of reasoning has become popular among both progressive Christians and non-religious people. It doesn’t require anyone to determine what is meant by “lying with a man as with a woman” or to parse the meaning of “abomination” in order to render it less ominous-sounding. In fact, it doesn’t require much engagement with the particulars of Leviticus 18:22 at all. Rather, the argument by shrimp works by attempting to undermine the significance of the “anti-gay” verse. The troubling verse is surrounded by other

biblical commandments that, it is implied, are morally untenable (such as slavery), irrelevant (such as the prohibitions on touching pigskin or eating shellfish), or entirely arbitrary (such as the prohibition on wearing clothing comprised of multiple different fibers). What makes Leviticus 18:22 so special, when most Christians are going about their days blithely wearing mixed-fiber clothing and ordering sweet-and-sour shrimp? In the absence of this consistent observance, those calling upon Leviticus 18:22 for support are revealed to be hypocritical, ignorant of the text they purport to esteem, or highly selectively employing the Bible to affirm their own prejudices. But despite the ostensible ability of the argument by shrimp to overcome the challenges of Leviticus 18:22, such a move may actually create more problems, particularly for liberal Christians, than it ever solves. The power of the rhetorical shift to some of the Hebrew Bible's other commandments lies in the assumption that nearly *everyone*, regardless of their positions on

LGBT civil rights, agrees that injunctions against shellfish and wool-linen blends are ludicrous. What kind of foolish person would believe in such a God? But, of course, there are many people who *do* affirm the important of biblical commandments regarding questions like which foods may be eaten and which clothes may be worn: Jews. According to [recent surveys](#), close to half of the world's Jews understand themselves to be at least partially observant of the commandments regarding diet. Although this self-definition varies widely, such statistics testify to the continuing importance of dietary restrictions even among relatively non-observant Jews. Regarding the commandment prohibiting the use of *shatnez*, or clothing made of both wool and linen, far fewer contemporary Jews adhere to this commandment—but the prohibition is still followed by many traditionally observant Jews. And while some observant Jews may do so for reasons other than divine commandments, there are many others who certainly would affirm

the divine origin of their many obligations. For these Jews, God may, in fact, hate shrimp.

The argument by shrimp, therefore, inadvertently functions as mockery of both Jews and Jewish law, whose origins lie in the verses humorously cited as refutations of Leviticus 18:22. But from the point of view of public discourse, what is perhaps more troubling is the erasure of Jews from the normative “we” imagined to comprise the public square. After all, the argument by shrimp works by appealing to the reasonable public, all of whom—with the exception of a few “fundies”—are understood to be in on the joke. The many Jews who value their commandments and the God who gave them have no voice in this conversation.

And for Christians making use of the shrimp trope, there’s another problem. The denigration of some of the Hebrew Bible’s commandments, as well as the assumption that no *reasonable* people observe such things any longer, comes uncomfortably close to a

supersessionist theological claim—a theology in which the old covenantal relationship between God and the people Israel has been “superseded” by a new Christ-based covenant in which no outdated or immoral or ridiculous commandments are incumbent upon anyone. In this formulation, even if there are Jews still observing their commandments, they are simply doing so in the mistaken belief that the covenant in which the commandments were made is still operative when in fact it is not, Christ having done away with the law.

There’s no doubt that liberal American Christians, who have led the way in initiating interfaith dialogues with American Jews, do not mean to suggest this. But intentionally or not, the argument by shrimp effectively contains this rejection of Jews, Jewish obligation, and Jewish theology. If good interreligious engagement begins with mutual respect for the customs and convictions of the other, this public trope may be doing quite a bit more harm than good.

Even beyond its implications for Christian-Jewish relations, the shrimp argument poses a sticky theological quandary for Christians themselves. After all, the biblical texts being employed—and, indeed, ridiculed—by the argument are texts from the sacred scriptural canon of these very same Christians. In using these texts to call into question the biblically-based, anti-homosexuality argument into question, the Christians employing this strategy effectively undermine the sacrality and normativity of their *own* sacred scripture. While appealing to these texts as examples of the immoral, the irrelevant, or the absurd may have rhetorical value in public debate, it also requires these Christians to dismiss as immoral, irrelevant, or absurd parts of their own Old Testament and undermine its sacred status.

Importantly, this isn't to suggest that the only "sacred" reading of Leviticus is a literal one. But the argument by shrimp doesn't provide an alternative hermeneutic for the passage—it simply dismisses it as unimportant. Though the

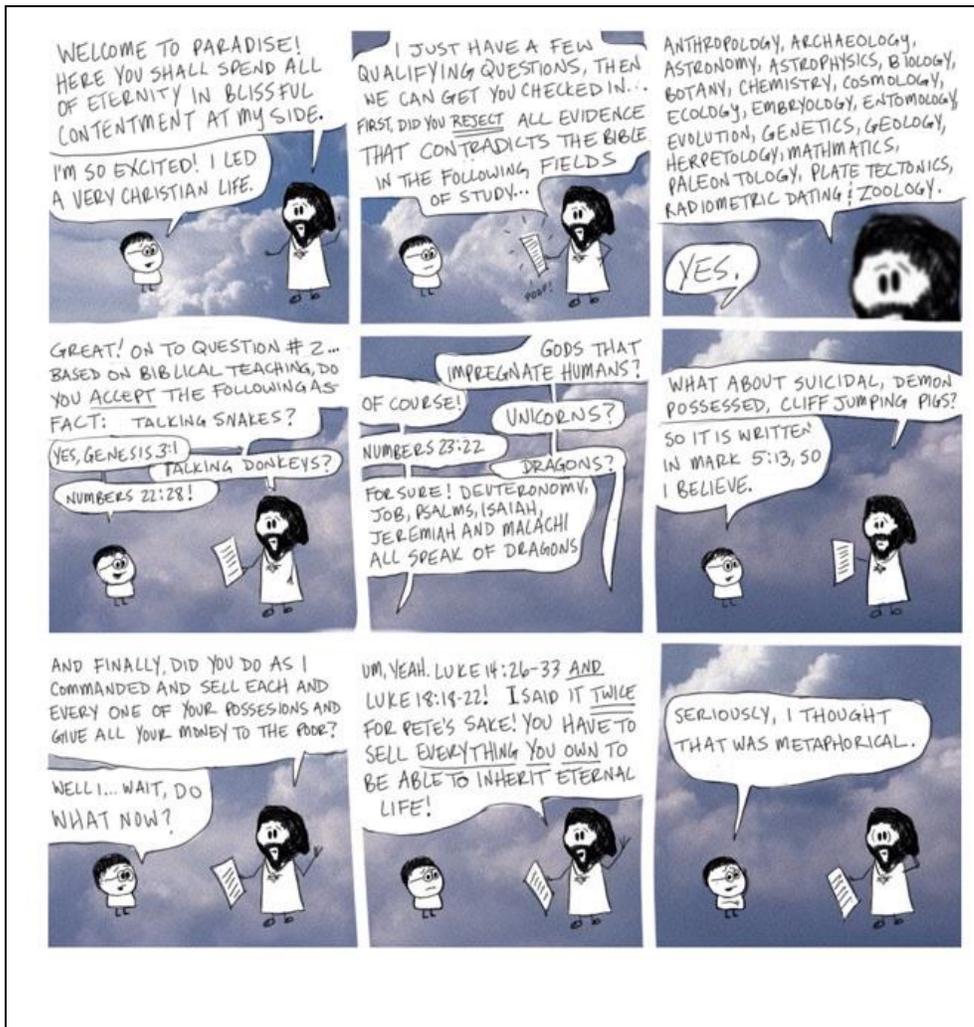
argument seeks to assert what the Old Testament is *not*—i.e. a text containing commandments which are both semantically literal and eternally binding—the response does not give any sense of what the Old Testament *is*, theologically. In what sense *is* it sacred?

How *does* the text—even in its strangest or most troubling commandments—function as a purveyor of divine instruction for Christians? What is the value of its many injunctions? And insofar as some of the Old Testament's commandments, even beyond the famous first ten, *are* frequently invoked as normative in their literal sense—for instance, those regarding [the status of immigrants](#) — how does the Christian determine which have these status and which are worthy of being dismissed when engaged in text-based, theological arguments? The charge of selective biblical citation, particularly from the Hebrew Bible, is just as pertinent to liberal Christians as to their more conservative counterparts, and may be just as difficult to resolve.

In the often heated and emotional debates about gay civil rights in the United States, it's understandable that proponents would use whatever tools are available to them—and at first glance, the argument by shrimp may seem to have tantalizing rhetorical possibilities. But an argument that requires activists and allies to effectively mock Jews or Judaism, or requires Christians to undermine

the significance of their *own* sacred scripture, is an argument that doesn't stand up to critical analysis. Given its pitfalls, advocates for gay rights should lay this rhetorical trope to rest, lest they find themselves merely exchanging one set of problematic interpretations for another.

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<http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/08/05/does-god-hate-shrimp-biblical-citation-gone-awry/#sthash.7UKzhkzy.dpuf>