

A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality

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Old Testament and Jewish Context

A New Testament perspective on homosexuality is anchored in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. The indispensable framework for interpreting the NT teaching on homosexuality is [Genesis 1–2](#), the creation narrative. We read in [Genesis 1:26–27](#) that God made man in his own image, but the image of God is reflected in two distinct genders, male and female. The distinction between man and woman is underlined in the fuller account of their creation in [Genesis 2:18–25](#). The physical differentiation of the man and the woman, and yet the amazing complementarity of such for bearing children indicates that marriage consists of the union of one woman and one man. The creation narrative, then, functions as the paradigm for males and females, and how they are to relate to one another sexually. The two different genders signify that marriage and sexual relations are restricted to the opposite sex, and that same sex relations are contrary to the created order.

As we read the rest of the OT, we see that the OT consistently proscribes homosexual behaviour. In [Leviticus 18:22](#) and [20:13](#) same sex relations are banned in general. The severity of the sin is such that the death penalty is mandated for homosexual activity. Some claim that the text only speaks against cult prostitution here, but in these two verses in Leviticus there is no reference to cultic activity, and homosexual relations are banned in broad terms. We see no hint that only certain kinds of homosexual activity are prohibited. The OT, of course, also indicts cultic prostitution that is homosexual in nature, but such commands do not suggest that there are same sex relationships that

(2006). *Themelios*, 31(3).

are permissible or even laudable. Rather, the negative view of homosexuality relative to cultic prostitution fits with the claim that homosexuality in general is contrary to God's created order.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah blends nicely into this same pattern. It will not do to say that the sin in view is not homosexuality since the visitors were angels, for the angels appeared on earth as men. Others claim that the sin is not homosexuality *per se*, but homosexual rape, and hence the text does not speak to loving monogamous homosexual relationships. It is probably the case that on its own this text cannot be pressed to yield a comprehensive indictment of homosexuality. Given the fabric of OT revelation as a whole, however, the homosexual dimension of the sin, and not exclusively the attempted homosexual rape, testifies to the egregiousness of the evil in view. Indeed, [Jude 7](#) confirms this interpretation, for Sodom and Gomorrah are described as 'departing after other flesh'. Jude does not concentrate on the attempted homosexual rape but the desire to engage in sexual relations with those of the same sex, and the letter identifies such as an evil deserving God's judgement.

We should also note that second temple Jewish literature consistently and unanimously speaks against homosexual practices. We read in the Testament of Naphtali, 'But you, my children, shall not be like that discern the Lord who made all things, so that you do not become like Sodom, which departed from the order of nature' ([T. Naph. 3.4](#)). We read in *Pseudo-Phocylides*, 'Do not transgress with unlawful sex the limits set by nature. For even animals are not pleased by intercourse of male with male. And let women not imitate the sexual role of men' (*Pseudo-Phocylides* 190–92; cf. [3](#), [210–14](#)). Both Josephus and Philo condemned homosexuality, and they contended that it was contrary to nature.

Jesus Tradition

Those who advocate homosexuality frequently say that the NT rarely proscribes homosexuality and that Jesus himself never speaks on the issue. But it is vital in reading the NT to recall that Jesus and all

the writers of the NT are heirs of the Jewish tradition, and the Jewish interpretive tradition regularly, and without exception, indicted homosexuality. Hence, the real question is whether NT writers departed from the tradition they inherited. When we consult the NT evidence, it is clear that NT writers occupy the same stream carved out for them by the Jewish tradition that preceded them.

Jesus himself, of course, never addresses the matter of homosexuality directly, but his reading of the creation account indicates that he assumed marriage did not include same sex couples ([Matt. 19:3–12](#); [Mark 10:2–12](#)). He defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman for life. The words of Jesus Christ demonstrate that God's created intention, relative to marriage (i.e., the union of one man and one woman), is still normative for the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not liberalize the OT view of marriage so as to embrace polygamy or divorce, nor did he open the door to homosexual relationships. On the contrary, he taught that the creation account clarified the divine intention, explaining that divorce is only permissible because of the hardness of human hearts.

[Romans 1:26–27](#)

The most important text regarding homosexuality in the NT is [Romans 1:26–27](#). We learn from this text and the surrounding context that all sin, including homosexuality, is a consequence of idolatry. The fundamental and root sin, therefore, is not homosexuality or any other erroneous behaviour. The sin that provokes God's wrath and leads to all other sin is the worship of the creature rather than the creator ([Rom. 1:25](#)). It is the failure to give thanks and praise to the one true and living God ([Rom. 1:21](#)). It is important to emphasize here that homosexual sin is not singled out because homosexuals are particularly egregious sinners. Sin is an equal opportunity and democratic employer! All human beings have failed to glorify and thank God the way they should. Paul probably focuses on homosexuality at this point because it mirrors idolatry. In other words, both idolatry and same sex relations distort what human beings were made to

(2006). *Themelios*, 31(3).

do. That is, all human beings turn the world upside down by worshipping self rather than God. And same sex relations invert what God has intended, so that human beings opt for same sex intercourse instead of engaging in sexual intercourse with the opposite sex.

The reason homosexuality is proscribed here is that it is contrary to nature (*para physin*). The reference to 'nature' indicates that Paul refers back to the creation account, to what God intended when he created men and women. Paul's use of the relatively unusual words *thelys* for females and *arsen* for males suggests that he draws on the creation account of Genesis ([Gen. 1:27](#), LXX) where the same two words are used. The terms call attention to the sexual distinctiveness of males and females, suggesting that same sex relations violate God's creational intent. Further, the phrase 'contrary to nature' echoes Stoic and Hellenistic Jewish traditions, which saw homosexual relations as a violation of the created order.

Modern controversy over homosexuality has provoked a re-evaluation of this text. John Boswell, for instance, argues that Paul does not condemn all forms of homosexuality but only homosexual acts practised by people who are 'naturally' heterosexual. Such a view fails because it introduces a flawed concept of nature into the text. When he uses the term 'nature', Paul does not mean one's individual and psychological predispositions. The word 'nature' refers to what God intended when he created men and women, and does not focus on the inherent character and disposition of human beings.

Robin Scroggs minimizes Paul's critique of homosexuality by claiming that Paul draws on Hellenistic Jewish tradition. Further, he thinks that pederasty is condemned here rather than homosexuality in general. The first argument presented by Scroggs reveals the weakness of his case, for there is no evidence that Paul departs from the unanimous Jewish conviction that homosexuality was sinful. Since Paul cites the tradition, he evidently passes on and concurs with the tradition. Nor does it work to restrict Paul's comments to pederasty, for the text contains a general proscription of homosexual acts, and does not specify relationships between men and boys.

Indeed, the text rules out Scroggs's interpretation, for Paul does not refer to homosexual relations between men and boys. Instead, he specifically speaks of 'males with males' in verse [27](#). Furthermore, verse [26](#) demonstrates the implausibility of Scroggs's thesis. There, same sex relations between females is proscribed, but there is no evidence that women and young girls engaged in same sex relations in the Hellenistic world. It follows, therefore, that in both verses [26](#) and [27](#) Paul speaks against homosexual relations in general, and the attempt to limit his words to pederasty fails.

Gerald Sheppard argues that Paul's words on homosexuality should be relativized in light of the canon as a whole since we gain understanding of God's Word as we perceive in our own era the true nature of homosexuality. Such a reading, however, does not truly rely on canonical Scripture but introduces an extra-biblical norm in interpreting Scripture. Our cultural view of homosexuality effectively trumps the biblical witness for Sheppard. Victor Furnish and Margaret Davies are more straightforward in claiming that we can no longer accept the Pauline view on homosexuality since we know more about homosexual relations than Paul. This view at least has the virtue of honesty, but at the same time it removes itself from the realm of biblical and Christian ethics by surrendering to the tides of our culture.

We can contrast the view of Sheppard and Furnish with William Webb and his hermeneutical trajectory that emphasizes the redemptive movement in Scripture, a redemptive movement that may even transcend what the biblical text teaches. Webb argues that such a view does not open the door to homosexuality, for there is no movement in the biblical text towards endorsing homosexuality. We can be grateful that Webb sees no room in the Scriptures for same sex relations, but, in my judgement, Webb's argument against homosexuality is not as strong as it should be. He downplays Paul's argument from creation in [Romans 1:26–27](#), and hence the fundamental argument against homosexuality in the Scriptures receives short shrift. Indeed, Webb's own method could be employed by others to justify homosexuality, and given the trajectory of our (2006). *Themelios*, 31(3).

culture and the evangelical movement, such an approach will probably not be long in coming.

[1 Corinthians 6:9](#) and [1 Timothy 1:10](#)

Paul also speaks against homosexuality in [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) and [1 Timothy 1:10](#). In both texts he used the term *arsenokoitai* to designate the sin of homosexuality. Paul's use of the term represents its first occurrence in Greek literature. David Wright is likely correct in suggesting that Paul derived the term from [Leviticus 18:22](#) and [20:13](#). When we look at both of these texts in the LXX, we can see the argument: *kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēse koitēn gynaikos bdelygma gar estin* ([Lev. 18:22](#)); *kai hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos bdelygma epoiēsan amphotoi thanatousthōsan enochoi eisin* ([Lev. 20:13](#)). What Wright argues, and other scholars have followed him here, is that the Pauline term *arsenokoitai* is a Pauline innovation deriving from the phrase, *arsenos koitēn* in the two texts from Leviticus. The term refers, then, to those who bed other males. In other words, it is a vivid way of denoting same sex intercourse between males. The other word used to designate same sex relations in [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) is *malakoi*. This word refers to the passive partner sexually, an effeminate male who plays the role of a female.

Both [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) and [1 Timothy 1:10](#), also proscribe homosexuality in general. Dale Martin suggests that the term *arsenokoitai* refers to those who exploit others sexually, but cannot be limited to same sex relations. Such a broadening of the term, however, does not fit with either the background of the term in [Leviticus 18:22](#) and [20:13](#) or the basic meaning of the word: bedding a male. Furthermore, the pairing of *arsenokoitai* with *malakoi* in [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) indicates that homosexual relations are in view. Paul could have used the more technical term *paidērastēs* (a pederast) if he had intended to restrict his comments to exploitative sex. Furthermore, if the only problem in view were sex that exploits others, there would be no need for Paul to mention the passive partner as well since he is the one being oppressed, and not the oppressor.

Robin Scroggs suggests another interpretation. He argues that the word *andrapodistais* (slave-dealers) in [1 Timothy 1:10](#) intimates that *arsenokoitai* refers to the slave dealers who sell boys and girls as slaves for brothel houses. Scroggs's view is scarcely persuasive, it is hard to believe that kidnappers were exclusively involved in the sex-trade business. Moreover, the term for slave-dealers is lacking in the [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) context, and it can scarcely be imported there to explain the term *arsenokoitai*. Finally, there is no reason to think that the term slave-dealers casts any light on the meaning of *arsenokoitai* in the vice list in [1 Timothy 1:9–10](#). The sins listed represent particularly egregious violations of the ten commandments.

Alternative explanations are provided for *malakoi* as well. Scroggs thinks the reference is to effeminate callboys and prostitution. In reply we can say that Paul's indictment would include such activities, but there is insufficient evidence to limit what Paul says here to male prostitution. Dale Martin argues that effeminacy broadly conceived is in view, so that the *malakoi* adorn themselves with soft and expensive clothes, consume gourmet foods, are pre-occupied with their hair-style, wear perfume, engage in heterosexual sex excessively, masturbate, are gluttons, lazy, and cowards, and also accept phallic penetration by another male. Martin thinks such a view is misogynist and should not be endorsed in our day. The Pauline evidence, however, does not verify Martin's view. In [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) the word *malakoi* is paired with *arsenokoitai*, and the combination of the two terms indicates that same sex relations are in view, not heterosexual sex or effeminate behaviour in general. Paul, of course, in the very same verse says that those who live sexually immoral lives as heterosexuals will be excluded from the kingdom as well, but he does not have such a notion in mind when he uses the terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*.

Sons and Daughters of Adam

As noted earlier, the biblical prohibition on homosexuality is questioned, because we allegedly have knowledge about homosexuality that was not (2006). *Themelios*, 31(3).

available to biblical writers. For instance, it is sometimes said that homosexuality is genetic, and biblical writers were not cognizant of this truth. It is not my purpose here to delve into the question of the genetic character of homosexuality. The scientific evidence supporting such a conclusion, however, is not compelling. Most studies yield the rather common sense conclusion that homosexuality is the result of both nature and nurture, and cannot be wholly explained by genetic factors.

However, I do want to look at the perspective of the Scriptures, relative to so-called genetic characteristics. Even if some sins could be traced to our genetics, it would not exempt us from responsibility for such sins. The Scriptures teach that all human beings are born into this world as sons and daughters of Adam, and hence they are by nature children of wrath ([Eph. 2:3](#)). They are dead in trespasses in sins ([Eph. 2:1, 5](#)), and have no inclination to seek God or to do what is good ([Rom. 3:10–11](#)). We come into the world as those who are spiritually dead ([Rom. 5:12, 15](#)), so that death reigns over the whole human race ([Rom. 5:17](#)). Indeed, human beings are condemned by virtue of Adam's sin ([Rom. 5:16, 18](#)). Such a radical view of sin in which we inherit a sinful nature from Adam means that sinful predispositions are part of our personalities from our inception. Hence, even if it were discovered that we are genetically predisposed to certain sinful behaviours like alcoholism or homosexuality, such discoveries would not eliminate our responsibility for our actions, nor would it suggest that such actions are no longer sinful. The Scriptures teach that we are born as sinners in Adam, while at the same time they insist we should not sin and are responsible for the sin we commit. We enter into the world as slaves of sin ([Rom. 6:6, 17](#)), but we are still morally blameworthy for capitulating to the sin that serves as our master.

New Persons in Christ

When we think of a NT perspective on homosexuality, we must remember the proclamation of the gospel, the truth that those

who are in Christ are new persons. In other words, we have substantial evidence that those who struggle with the sin of homosexuality can live a new life by God's grace. We are enabled to live new lives because of who we are in Christ. Those who put their trust in Christ are justified by faith ([Rom. 5:1](#)). They have peace with God and are reconciled to him through the cross of Christ ([Rom. 5:1, 10](#)). They are adopted as God's children ([Rom. 8:14-17](#)). They are redeemed and liberated from the power of sin, so that they may be zealous for good works ([Tit. 2:14](#)). They are now saved by grace through faith ([Eph. 2:8](#)). They have been born again through the Holy Spirit. They are a new creation ([Gal. 6:16](#); [2 Cor. 5:17](#)). All people enter the world as sons and daughters of Adam and so are under the dominion of 'the old man'. But now, by virtue of union with Christ, they are clothed with the 'new man'. They have put the old man off and have been endowed with the new man. Those who are in Christ are sanctified ([1 Cor. 1:30](#); [6:11](#)), so that they stand before God as those who are holy and clean in his sight. Their sins are truly forgiven, so that they do not live under the shackles of the past ([Eph. 1:14](#); [Col. 2:11-14](#)).

The Continuing Struggle with Sin and the Promise of Moral Perfection

We face two dangers here. We may under-emphasize our newness in Christ, so that the redemption accomplished for us is negated or trivialized. On the other hand, we may fall prey to an over-realized eschatology that underestimates the continuing presence of sin in the lives of believers. The already, but not yet dimension of Christian teaching is immensely practical when it comes to understanding sanctification. [First John 3:1-3](#) makes it clear that believers are not all that we will be. We will be conformed fully to the likeness of Jesus only when he returns. Hence, in the meantime, believers continue to struggle with sin. We stand in the right before God by virtue of the work of Christ, but we are not perfected. The emblem of the continuing presence of sin in our lives is our mortal body. The NT regularly teaches that we will experience moral perfection when our

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corruptible bodies become incorruptible, when this mortal puts on immortality. In the meantime, we continue the struggle against sin as long as we are in our bodies until the day of resurrection ([Phil. 3:20-21](#)). The resurrection of our bodies testifies that the bodies are not inherently sinful, but as sons and daughters of Adam we are born into the world with sin reigning over us as whole persons ([Rom 5:12-19](#)).

The tension of Christian experience surfaces here. We are new creations in Christ and liberated from the power of sin, but at the same time we await the fullness of our redemption. The newness of our redemption in Christ does not mean that we are completely free of sin. Rather, as believers we continue to battle against, and struggle with sin every day. [First Peter 2:11](#) says, 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.' Notice that the passions and desires from the flesh are still powerful in all believers. They are so strong that they war against us.

We might think that we will not have any desires to do evil as believers in Jesus Christ, but as long as we are in the body, desires for sin, sometimes incredibly powerful desires, will be ours. Such desires do not mean that we are failures, or that we are not truly believers. They are a normal part of the Christian life before the day of resurrection. We ought not to think, therefore, that the newness we have in Christ means that believers will have no desire to return to a homosexual lifestyle. The newness we have in Christ does not mean that we are freed from old temptations. There is a progressive and even sometimes slow growth in holiness in our Christian lives. Indeed, we can sin dramatically as believers, even if we have been Christians for a long time. Even when we sin in such a way, there is no excuse for sinning, and we are called to a deep sorrow and repentance for the evil in our lives.

This explains why we must fight the fight of faith afresh every day. Peter does not upbraid his readers for having desires to do wrong, but he does exhort them to abstain from these fleshly desires that war against our souls. In [Romans 8:13](#), the apostle Paul says that believers are to put to death by the Spirit

the desires of the body. Again, from this verse we see that Christians still face sin since they live in corruptible bodies, and the battle against sin is so fierce that the deeds of the body must be slain. They must be put to death. This fits with [Colossians 3:5](#) where we are exhorted to put to death our members that are on earth. The metaphor of putting these desires and actions to death demonstrates that we are not talking about something easy and simple here.

The NT, of course, does not simply leave us with the message: 'Just say "no" '. It trumpets the grace of God in Jesus Christ that liberates us from the mastery and tyranny of sin. Those who have died and risen with Christ are no longer slaves to sin ([Rom. 6](#)). The power and dominion of sin has been broken decisively, so that we are now free from the tentacles of sin and are enabled to live in a way that pleases God. [Romans 8:13](#) exhorts us to conquer sinful actions by the power of the Holy Spirit. We realize that we cannot triumph over sin in our own strength. We call on the Spirit to help us in our hour of need, and we realize that we will not be full of the Spirit ([Eph. 5:18](#)) unless the Word of Christ dwells in us richly ([Col. 3:16](#)). We remember the truth of the gospel that we are loved because Christ Jesus died for us. We are adopted, justified, reconciled, redeemed, and holy in Christ. The exhortation to live a new life comes from a Father who has loved us and delivered us from final condemnation. It is from a Father who promises to complete what he has started on the last day ([Phil. 1:6](#)). We have the promise that we will be fully, and finally sanctified ([1 Thess. 5:23-24](#)). Hence, we trust his promises to strengthen and free us from the allure of sin. We are not yet perfected, but we are changing by his Spirit. And we are changing because we have been changed and will be changed from one degree of glory to another, just as from the Lord who is the Spirit of freedom ([2 Cor. 3:17-18](#)).