

Biblical References to Homosexuality

The Old Testament

Passage 1 Genesis 19:4–5

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.”

Passage 2 Judges 19:22

While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, “Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.”

Genesis and Judges are about inhospitality, not homosexuality.

“In the 18th chapter [of Genesis], God says that he is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because he has heard that they are exceedingly wicked. He brings with him two messengers—angels—in the form of man. The next morning, Abraham accompanies the two angels to Sodom and Gomorrah and he takes them to Lot’s house. Lot entertains them. He feeds them, he allows them to have lodging. It was required among the Hebrew people that if someone came to your door, you were obligated to take them in. One of the most serious social breaches was to not entertain a stranger.”

Rev. Dr. Laurence C. Keene, Disciples of Christ

“Sodom was an incredibly wealthy community and they didn’t want to share their wealth. [They] thought that if travelers passed through and were welcomed, they might want to come and take [their] wealth. So they canceled the law of the welcoming of travelers. Having violated the rules, they threatened Lot and his guests with violence.”

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Orthodox Rabbi

“...these men wanted to gang rape these two males, these two strangers, as an act of humiliation.”

Rev. Dr. Laurence C. Keene, Disciples of Christ

“Anal rape was great way in the ancient mind to humiliate, demean, and punish. Armies that would defeat other forces would not uncommonly rape the defeated members of his army. Sodom’s story is not about license or promiscuity or even perversity. Sodom, according to the rabbis, is about cruelty. It’s about inhospitality.”

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Orthodox Rabbi

The Old Testament *cont'd*

Passage 3 *Leviticus 18:22*

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Passage 4 *Leviticus 20:13*

If 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.

Leviticus equates homosexuality with cursing one's parents. Its punishment for both is death. Most modern Christians do not consider these commands relevant to their lives.

"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."

Rev. Mel White, co-founder of Soulforce

"...the purpose of the purity rules in the Old Testament is to allow Israel to reflect in its life the holiness of God, understood as wholeness, completeness or perfection. The human body, for instance, should be the perfect, unflawed, unblemished container. That would explain why sexual emissions (Lev.15:16) and other bodily discharges (Lev.15:1) make a person unclean, as do menstruation (Lev.15:9) and marital sexual intercourse (Lev.15:18). These are a breach in the body as a perfect container. A priest with bodily deformities would profane the sanctuary (Lev.21:16). ...

The requirement for completeness or perfection means that classes or categories must be kept distinct and not mixed, confused or confounded. Order is required. Thus cattle are not to be bred to different kind; fields are not to be sown with different kinds of seeds; garments made of different material are not to be worn (Lev.19:19). ...

The pertinent point here is that the condemnation of homosexuality in Leviticus categorizes it as a source of uncleanness rather than a sin. ... In a patriarchal society, homosexuality compromises purity in the production of male heirs to hold the land. ...

Homosexual practice in a patriarchal society is an affront to male honor. ... For a man to be put in the position of being the passive partner—the penetrated one—in homosexual sex is such a violation of his masculine honor that men should protect other men from this offense at any cost—the sacrifice of one's virgin daughter or one's concubine."

Dan Otto Via, author of Homosexuality and the Bible

The New Testament

Passage 5 *Romans 1:24–28*

²⁴Therefore 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 worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶For 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. ²⁸And 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.

Romans describes pagan worship (worshipping false idols) and warns against forsaking God.

“[Paul’s] reference [in Romans], of course, is to exploitive same-sex relationships among pagan Romans and Greeks. Paul certainly never contemplated the kind of monogamous long-term relationships that are very much normal among homosexual people today.”

Rev. Peter Gomes, Harvard University

“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. ...

Did these priests and priestesses get into these behaviors because they were lesbian or gay? I don’t think so. Did God abandon them because they were practicing homosexuals? No.”

Rev. Mel White, co-founder of Soulforce

“The people Paul had in mind refused to acknowledge and worship God, and for this reason were abandoned by God. And being abandoned by God, they sank into sexual depravity.

The homosexuals I know have not rejected God at all; they love God and they thank God for his grace and his gifts. How, then, could they have been abandoned to homosexuality as a punishment for refusing to acknowledge God?”

Rev. Dr. Louis B. Smedes

The New Testament *cont'd*

Passage 6 *1 Corinthians 6:9–10*

⁹Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Passage 7 *1 Timothy 1:8–11*

⁸Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. ⁹This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, ¹⁰fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Corinthians and Timothy fall victim to translation ambiguity: “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. Paul shouts across the distance, ‘You are breaking God’s heart by the way you are treating one another. 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. We’ll say more about them later, when we ask what the texts say about sex. But first let’s see what the texts say about God.

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.

Greek scholars say that in the first century, the Greek word malokois 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.

Passages 6 and 7 *cont'd on page 5*

The New Testament *cont'd*

Passages 6 and 7 *cont'd*

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 (*malokois*) 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. So, once again, I am convinced that this passage says a lot about God, but nothing about homosexuality as we understand it today.

Rev. Mel White, co-founder of Soulforce

Gender & Sexuality

"It is the hatred of women that is the fuel of this whole thing. When the coach wants to humiliate his team, he calls them a bunch of girls. Why does this work? Because the worst thing you can do to a man is call him a woman."

Rabbi Steven Greenberg
Orthodox Rabbi

"Combine our fear of the other, fear of sex, and the fear of the feminine—homophobia is well founded in our psyche."

Rev. Peter Gomes
Harvard University

Homophobia & Violence

"I've never seen a man in my life I wanted to marry. If one ever looks at me like that, I'm going to kill him and tell God he died. God calls it an abomination. It's an abomination. It's abomination!"

Rev. Jimmy Swaggart
during a sermon, September 12, 2004

"The Bible is an incredibly powerful weapon. People use it as a weapon. ... We have to be terribly careful about this scripture that people hold tight to, and be clear that it is about compassion and love, because what it otherwise will do is wreak havoc and torture and death."

Rev. Susan Sparks
American Baptist Church

God's Inclusive Love

"I can't, for the life of me, imagine that God would say, 'I will punish you because you are black. You should have been white. I will punish you because you are a woman. You should have been a man. I punish you because you are homosexual. You ought to have been heterosexual.' I can't, for the life of me, believe that that is how God sees things."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu
Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Other Notable Quotes

"Black Christians and other Christians, have always discarded scriptures that damned us in the name of religion. Like the curse of ham in Genesis 9:18 or support of slavery as in Ephesians 6:5. We should just as easily and just as eagerly discard those which marginalize others because the God we believe made us, made them, too."

Julian Bond, Chairman, NAACP

"When a marriage is dissolved, the issue of alimony, distribution of property, child support, custody and visitation is determined and enforced by the state, not the church. Marriage is clearly a civil institution."

Rev. Eric Lee
President/CEO of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Greater Los Angeles and author of Proposition 8: The California Divide

"Five hundred years of reputable critical scholarship in the English language on these texts is not something that somebody's just come up with in the last three or four years, apologists for a 'liberal' reading of scripture."

Rev. Peter Gomes, Harvard University