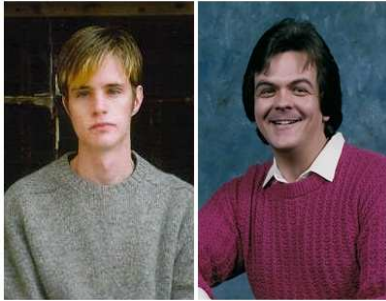


## Homosexuality and the Bible: The Practice of Safe Texts by Rev. Dr. Robert E. Goss

*No credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals can be made from the Bible unless one chooses to read Scripture in a way that sustains the existing prejudice against homosexuality and homosexuals...The "problem," of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it...Peter Gomes (1)*

For the last several years, I have lectured on homosexuality and Christianity to some twenty community groups, churches, and universities per year. It is a personal commitment to end homohatred in the U.S. In a daily gay listserv to which I subscribe, there is not nearly a day without homophobic letters to the editor, which cite a small group of biblical verses to justify their homohatred and opposition to translesbigay marriage, adoption, and civil rights. When I spoke to the University of Central Arkansas, my talk could not publicly be advertised to the greater university because there were administrative concerns about the negative reactions from predominantly conservative Christians in Conway. When I spoke to Georgetown University, posters announcing my lecture were consistently torn down or vandalized. Religious homohatred does not seem to recede but becomes more virulent in Protestant or Catholic enclaves of higher education where academic freedom has been traditionally espoused. Religious homohatred is being challenged from the emerging body of scholarly evidence about the very biblical texts often used to justify that hatred.



Matthew Shepard      Billy Jack Gaither

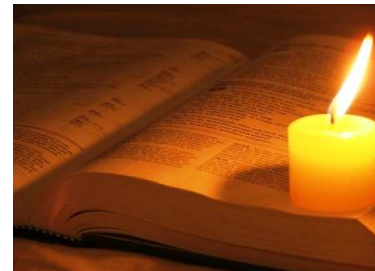
Recently I have been reflecting on the ACT UP slogan: "Silence = Death." I was the target of a hate crime, a minor annoyance in comparison to the murders of Matthew Shepard or Billy Jack Gaither and the violent harassment experienced by many translesbigays. Someone broke into my university office, tore off the book cover of Jesus ACTED UP from the door of my office, and posted biblical quotes with the word "faggot". The homophobe took the hardcover of the book from my shelf, carved out the pages of the book, stuffed rotting meats in the book, and replaced the book within my bookshelf. It was an act directed at myself for being openly gay and at my vision of a queer Christianity; such queer visions provoke a heated and often virulent reaction from heterosexual Christianity. Heterosexist Christianity cannot tolerate any heresy from compulsory heterosexuality.

Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph Smith define heterosexism as "a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation. It denotes prejudice in favor of heterosexual people and connotes prejudice against bisexual and, especially, homosexual people...It is rooted in a largely cognitive constellation of beliefs about human sexuality." (2) This bias holds heterosexuality as normative for judging all forms of human sexuality. Over the last several years several heterosexist evangelical authors have published a number of books on the texts often applied to homosexuality. (3) While some authors may engage the developments in critical, historical-biblical scholarship, most do not. Even those evangelical scholars who engage and read the scholarship of the last two decades spend time refuting that body of critical scholarship and repackage the same old exegesis of these texts, promoting theological hatred and spiritual abuse. They are disingenuous in claiming that their readings are the plain meanings of the text, for they fail first to understand their own heterosexist biases and second to appropriate critical cultural studies on gender and sexuality. In addition, these conservative scholars take pains to depict homosexual life as loathsome, depressing, lonely, and dangerous. These stereotypes are false caricatures, pointing to the failure of these scholars to engage queer communities of faith such as the MCC (Metropolitan Community Church). These scholars reflect the biases of their own church communities and their social practice of violence and exclusion of "practicing homosexuals."

When I assert that the Jewish and Christian scriptures say nothing whatsoever about homosexuality as an orientation or a modern identity template, it is not an empty mantra. Behind such a statement stands a large body of contemporary literature from cultural and gender studies about the social construction of gender and sexuality, largely ignored by homophobic Christians and scholars. (4) "Homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are modern concepts coined in German psychiatric practice in 1870 to describe emerging modern identities. The 1909 Merriam-Webster's New International Dictionary defined homosexuality as a medical term, referring to "morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex", while the 1923 edition defined heterosexuality as the "morbid passion for one of the opposite sex." (5) It was only in the 1934 edition of Webster's

dictionary that "heterosexuality" was changed to mean "manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex." (6)

Despite claims by religious extremists, there are no biblical words that can be translated by the word "homosexual" because the concept of sexual orientation was totally absent in the ancient Mediterranean world. The Bible speaks neither about sexual orientation nor about sexual identity nor about the modern subjectivities of heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgendered identity. These identities are absent from the biblical worldview. The apostle Peter did not think of himself as heterosexual, and Paul did not view himself as homosexual because such concepts were alien to their thinking about sexuality in the ancient Near Eastern cultures



and first century Greco-Roman world. What the Bible does speak about is a cultural understanding of sexuality and gender from masculinist ideology, or what I term the code of the penetrator.

Modern heterosexist scholars fail to understand the ancient Mediterranean "insistence on understanding sexual differences as matter of degree, gradations of basic male type." (7)

They are already invested in an ideological and rigid gender system that privileges heterosexual masculinity over femininity and other variations of sexuality. Their ideological blinders motivate them to claim the "plain truth of text" that privileges heterosexuality over all other sexual variations. Theological ethicist Beverly Harrison reminds us that homophobia is embedded in misogyny, the hatred of women. (8) Harrison's insight has remained a key for me in comprehending the masculinist model of sexuality reflected in the ancient cultures of the biblical texts.

The Greco-Roman cultures understood gender differently from our own culture. In *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur demonstrates how the ancient world constructed sexuality not within our contemporary two-sex model but within a one-sex model:

"Thus the old model, in which men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male, gave way by the late eighteenth century to a new model of radical dimorphism, of biological divergence. An anatomy and physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of woman in relation to man." (9)

Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures perceived the two genders within a continuum of and range of maleness. The male-female continuum was always hierarchical, with females as lesser males on the one-gender model of maleness.

Ancient sexuality codes find their basis in status: sex is most often viewed as an act between the active partner, the partner of a higher social status, who assumes the role of the penetrator, and the passive partner, a female or male partner of inferior social status, takes on the penetrated position. Sex is comprehended within the model of active/passive or insertor/insertee or what colloquial language terms top/bottom. Men in the ancient Greco-Roman world were catalogued according to their social status (and thus power). Free men or citizens were expected to play the insertive role in sex with either female or male. Sex is essentially penetration of a person of lesser status-whether it is a female, a lesser male, or a youth. Penetration establishes or expresses a superior status over the penetrated. Sexual penetration includes penile-vaginal, penile-anal, and penile-oral. Roman scholar Craig Williams notes:



"In Roman terms they [males] were either men (*viri*), who might seek to penetrate females vaginally (*fututores*, to use the coarse Roman vocabulary), to penetrate either males or females anally (*pedicones*), or to penetrate either males or females orally (*irrumatores*), or any combination of these three; or they were ridiculed as non-men, who might be foul their mouths by giving others pleasure (*fellatores* or *cunnilingi*), or who might abrogate their masculinity by

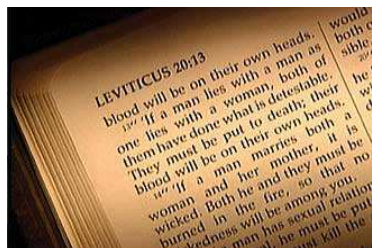
being anally penetrated (*pathici* or *cinaedi*)."<sup>(10)</sup>

A Roman man engaged in sexual relations with free Romans other than his wife could retain his masculine status as long as he maintained the active role of the penetrator. He could freely seek sexual partners from prostitutes, free persons or slaves of either sex, or his own slaves of either sex. No one ever questioned his Roman's masculine status as long as he was a penetrator in oral, vaginal, or anal sex. The free-born man who was passive in sexual relations with other men was viewed with contempt and derision. Even today, North African men like to penetrate all kinds of human beings, women, boys, and men. The active male in no way endangers his male identity or social status by penetrating another male, whereas penetrated males cannot be conceptualized as men. Adult male prostitution is regarded as shameful because it feminizes the passive male.

There are seven texts used or rather misused as texts of terror, as weapons against translesbigay people: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Genesis 19 and Judges 19, 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; and Romans 1:26-27. These texts, misused by some, reflect a model of ancient sexuality and gender codes different from those in our postmodern world. The issue behind these biblical texts traditionally applied to homosexuality does not concern same-sex behaviors but deals with phallic violence and gender transgressions.

### Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

The only direct reference to male homoeroticism in the Hebrew scriptures appears in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians take the verses as a blanket condemnation of all homosexual practices. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 speak of a man who "lies the lying down of a woman." What do these verses really prohibit? Lying down is a euphemism for a sexual act, and the meaning of "the lying down of a woman" (*miskab issah*) is not obvious to a modern reader. In our culture, we speak of going to bed with someone, but our phrase is ambiguous. It tells us nothing of what happens in bed or who does what to whom in bed. Does the Hebrew phrase denote oral, vaginal, or anal sex? It can include all of the above or none of the above. The most persuasive argument is that it refers to male-to-male anal intercourse.



Saul Olyan, a biblical scholar at Brown University, deciphers the meaning of "the lying down of a woman" in parallel uses of the idiom "the lying down of a male" (*miskab sacra*) within the Hebrew Bible. He concludes that the phrase "the lying down of a male" must mean male vaginal penetration.<sup>(11)</sup> Olyan speculates that "the lying down of a woman" means "something like the act or condition of a woman's being penetrated, or more simply, vaginal receptivity, the opposite of vaginal penetration."<sup>(12)</sup> In sexual intercourse, a woman experiences male penetration and offers her

male partner vaginal receptivity. Olyan concludes, "the male-male sex laws of the Holiness Source appear to be circumscribed in their meaning; they seem to refer specifically to intercourse and suggest that anal penetration was seen as analogous to vaginal penetration on some level, since the "lying down of a woman" seems to mean vaginal receptivity."<sup>(13)</sup> Other interpreters such as Thomas Thurston and Daniel Boyarin also concur that the issue is anal intercourse.<sup>(14)</sup> The verses in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 do not prohibit male oral sex, masturbation, or intercrural sex (intercourse in which a male's genitals rubs between the thighs of his partner). They are totally silent about the range of female-to-female sexuality. Nor do they prohibit a bisexual male engaging in group sex as long as he does not penetrate another man or be penetrated by another.

Olyan takes "the lying down of a woman" (*miskebe issa*) to conclude that "receptivity is bounded on the side of biological sex; it is constructed as appropriate exclusively to females; it is gendered as feminine."<sup>(15)</sup> Martti Nissinen notes that some of the provisions of Middle Assyrian laws indicate the male receptivity or passivity in freeborn men, either coerced or consensual, disgraced the passive male by categorizing him with slaves and females.<sup>(16)</sup> Here the Leviticus text objects to a male who becomes a substitute for a female. It calls a man functioning as a woman an abomination (*to'eba*), what Saul Olyan has rendered as "the violation of a socially constructed boundary" or perhaps a taboo. "Abomination" occurs six times in chapters 18 and 20 of the Holiness Code, referring to ritual impurity; it occurs nowhere else in Leviticus. Therefore, Leviticus 18:22 only condemns anal intercourse, not proscribing all male-to-male sexual acts. For Olyan, the misuse of male semen, not the act of anal intercourse, generates the ban in Leviticus.

There is one problem with Olyan's interpretation, for nowhere is there condemnation of male-to-female anal intercourse in the holiness code in Leviticus. It is not the mixture of semen and excrement that generates the ban and imputation of ritual impurity for male-to-male anal intercourse. Rather there is another type of mixture that generates impurity. Martti Nissinen points out that two men engaged in anal intercourse mirrored the male and female roles. Because the penetrated lost his manly honor, the transgression is a confusion of gender roles. Ancient Near Eastern sources were concerned about confusing or mixing gender roles, and the Hebrews in particular were concerned about mixing their gender roles, something that becomes clear in the prohibitions against cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 23:2), against eunuchs, against any sort of third-gender roles comparable to those of castrated male devotees to the Mesopotamian goddesses. (17)

Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin provides Talmudic arguments to support this insight of Nissinen on the mixing of genders. While the Talmudic interpretation is historically much later than the social context of Israel's Holiness Code, it provides a coherent reading consistent with the gender codes of the earlier period:

"There was something pathological and depraved, however, in the spectacle of an adult male allowing his male body to be used as if it were of the body of a person of penetrable status, whether the man did so for pleasure or for profit. It is sex-role reversal, or gender deviance that is problematized here....I suggest also penetration of a male constituted a consignment of him to the class of females ... a degradation of status; this constituted a sort of mixing of kinds, a general taboo occurrence in Hebrew culture." (18)

For Boyarin, the mixing (*tebhel*) is akin to the taboo of cross-dressing: "The woman shall not wear that which pertains unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment" (Deuteronomy 22:5). The priestly Holiness Code reflects the creation theology of Genesis 1:27 where God created male and female as separate creatures. The kinds are to be kept separate, not blurred or mixed: "it is 'use' of a male as female that is to'ebha, the crossing of body from one God-given category to another, analogous to the wearing of clothes that belong to the other sex." (19)



Boyarin notes that the Hebrew word for female (*neqeba*) means "orifice bearer." (20) The female represent the category of penetrative receptivity. He concludes, "Men penetrate, women are penetrated; so for a man to be penetrated constitutes a 'mixing of kinds' analogous to cross dressing." (21) Male-to-male anal intercourse mixes gender roles by relegating one partner to the role of a receptive woman. The receptive partner is condemned as well because the male penetrator causes his partner to cross gender boundaries and become like a woman. Sexuality is understood as penetrative sex - male penetration of women or of lesser males who become women. This explains why there is no condemnation of female homoeroticism - it was impossible for the ancient Israelites to conceive of two women having sex within the penetrative model of sexuality.

The foremost scholar on Leviticus, Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, advances the notion that if the Holiness Code is so bound to the holy land of Israel, then Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are not applicable to female, gentile, or Jewish same-sex relations outside of Israel. It applies only to Jewish homoeroticism within the land of Israel. Jacob Milgrom concludes, "The ban on homosexuality is limited to male Jews and inhabitants of the holy land. The basis for the ban...is the need for procreation which opposes, in biblical times, the wasting of seed." (22) Milgrom's line of thinking upsets those critics who want to make these verses a blanket condemnation of both female and male homoeroticism. He takes serious the opening verses of Leviticus 18 that explicitly state why the Egyptians and the Canaanites lost the land - because of their violations of purity.

## Sodom and Gomorrah and Judges 19: Male Rape

Genesis 19 shares a history of narrative development with its parallel story in Judges 19. However, there is no clear scholarly consensus on the dependence of one story on another or a core narrative tradition that branched into narrative traditions. Gender codes of honor and shame, sexual property are equally operative in both stories.

The centuries-long Christian tradition that relates Genesis 19 to same-sex practices has given us the term "sodomy," coined in medieval Christianity. (23) It is the story most frequently cited by homophobic Christians

for their hatred of translesbigays. Sodom has become the image of human depravity and moral decay, but the story in Genesis 19 has nothing to do with same-sex sexuality; it has to do, rather, with male rape.



The story of the destruction of Sodom-Gomorrah has been incorporated into the Abraham saga. Chapters 18-19 of Genesis form a literary unit that many fundamentalist and evangelical interpreters fail to analyze as a whole. When chapter 19 is read with chapter 18, the inhospitality of Sodom is contrasted with the rural social code of hospitality. Hospitality is part of the cultural code and editor's theological motif operative in Genesis 18-19. It is introduced in chapter 18 when Abraham welcomes and entertains the messengers from God. In a similar fashion, Lot welcomes the messengers in Sodom. The editor contrasts the rural,

pastoral welcoming of strangers with the urban hostility to them. The messengers are foreigners within the city, and the men of Sodom surround the house and insist that "we might know them (yadha)." The Hebrew word to "know" (yadha) is occasionally used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, and here in this chapter and Judges 19, yadha needs to be translated and contextualized in the sexual codes of the penetrator and the penetrated in ancient world. A more apt colloquial translation would be to "womanize, make into a woman." It has the context to "penetrate a male like a woman," or anal intercourse. Ancient Near Eastern societies subjected those they had conquered, enemies, strangers, and trespassers to phallic anal penetration to indicate their subordinate status.

Lot's offer of his daughters to the mob is shocking to readers. He owns his daughters; they are his sexual property for his disposition. He was willing to let his daughters suffer gang rape than allowing the messengers to suffer such collective violence, gender denigration, and humiliation. Few homophobic interpreters ever raise an outcry at the nonconsensual offer of Lot's daughters to the mob but focus their attention on the rejection of the daughters to indicate that homosexuality is the center of the incident. The mob has rejected women for the male messengers as gay men have rejected heterosexuality for other men. Yet Lot's offer dispels any identification with what modern society designates as homosexuality. The crowd is out to inflict the collective violence of rape and thus remove the threat of the strangers. The crowd is no more representative of homosexuality than a local urban street gang who attacks and rapes a stranger coming into their territory.

But hospitality interpreters such John Boswell and John McNeill bracket out some vital interpretative elements: phallic violence and patriarchal gender codes of domination/subordination and honor/shame. (24) As heterosexist interpreters, their hospitality analysis suffers from a similar lack of gender analysis. Much of the basis for their interpretation is based on taking to know (yadha) as knowing and not as a sexual act. In the Talmud, the rabbis took the offense of the men of Sodom as sexual. (25)



Recent exegesis of this text has helped some churches to acknowledge that Genesis 19's primary concern is not about homoerotic relations but violent sexual abuse of outsiders. But heterosexist interpreters focus not on the threat to the daughters but on the attempted male-to-male rape. Many churches contextualize the sin of Sodom as rampant homosexuality. If they address issues of phallic violence and hospitality, they localize the sin as homosexual rape and the vilest act of inhospitality. Heterosexist interpreters neglect the violence to women, and this fact slides into the background of their church documents and policies against homosexuality. They are unable to comprehend the connections between misogyny and homophobia.

Biblical scholar George Edwards supplements the hospitality interpretation by underscoring the phallic violence and the prophetic cry for justice. The "outcry" (*zecaqa*) against Sodom in Genesis 18:21 and 19:3 is a technical word for oppression and injustice, not sexual sin. (26) In his commentary on Genesis, the German biblical scholar Gerhard Von Rad describes it as signifying "the cry for help which one who suffers great injustice screams." (27) Gary Comstock reads the story as patriarchal propaganda, the "latest macho, sexist, rape-and-pillage, straight-from-hell video rental." (28) He compares the patriarchal violence of the story to the attitudes of gay-bashers. These readings rightly shift reader attention from the violation of hospitality to patriarchal violence to male strangers and to the daughters, "the other" inscribed within the biblical text.

Leland White and several other scholars expand the interpretative framework to weave the themes of hospitality and sexual violence within the Hebrew cultural script of honor/shame. (29) The honor-oriented cultures of the ancient Near East comprehend hospitality not within an individualist, modern perspective but within a collective perspective of families, clans, villages, cities, and people. Hospitality is enjoined by many ancient codes where such a virtue often entails a life-and-death situation. When the messengers enter into Sodom as strangers, they have no legal status. The men of Sodom assess the threat and decide to make them symbolically women and thus physically submissive. They intend to violate their bodily integrity to remind them that their status is comparable to women. Lot, as a patron, extends hospitality to the strangers, and their acceptance of his hospitality indicates their subordination to him. The Sodomites' assault is an affront on Lot's honor because they threaten his control over his home by sexually raping them. By standing in the doorway and intervening, Lot symbolically asserts his right over his household and his right to offer hospitality to the messengers in Sodom.

The laws of hospitality are fused with the patriarchal gender code that privileges males over females. That code requires that Lot protect male honor over female honor. In other words, it is better to shame a woman than a man. So Lot offers the sexual capital of his household, his virgin daughters, in exchange for preserving the honor of the strangers. The mob rape would not only dishonor the messengers but also Lot, his household, all his clan or all those people associated with him. Nissinen writes:

"In a patriarchal society, manly honor largely is equivalent to human value, to offend is a grave shame. Gang rape of a man has always been an extreme means to disgrace one's manly honor, to reduce one to a woman's role....It is not a matter of exercising one's homosexual orientation or looking for erotic pleasure but simply of protecting or threatening one's masculinity. Rape-homosexual or heterosexual-is the ultimate means of subjugation and domination." (30)

The text of Genesis 19 can be read as a male contest of honor, or contest of testosterone, between Lot and the men of Sodom, and the resolution of the honor contest occurs in the blinding of the Sodomites. The editor of Genesis uses this story to enhance Israelite honor in the confrontation with non-Israelite city life. The Sodomites are engaging social violence and oppression in their attempt at male rape, and Sodom became a symbol of injustice and oppression within the Hebrew scriptural tradition. In numerous biblical texts, there are no indications of the sin of Sodom as same-sex behaviors. In Isaiah 1:9-10, injustice, insincere sacrifice, and oppression are the sins of Sodom. Ezekiel comprehends the sin of Sodom as a sin of injustice; he writes, "This was the sin of your sister Sodom: she did not support the poor and the needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me." (Ezekiel 16:49-50) Other examples are Jeremiah 23:14, which designates adultery and hypocrisy as the sin of Sodom, and Wisdom of Solomon 19:13-14, which identifies the sin as the violation of hospitality. When Jesus says that it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for those not hearing God's messengers, he has in mind not the Sodomites' sexual practices, but their inhospitality (Matt. 10:14-15; 11:20-24; Luke 10:10-12). It is the refusal to hear God's messengers. The Hebrew biblical authors and Jesus were at home with the interpretation of the Sodom story as a crime of violence, inhospitality, and social oppression.

Judges 19 brings into sharper relief than Genesis 19 the relationship of the gender codes and male violence. The Levite's wife asserts her independence and returns to her father's household. In ancient Hebrew patriarchy, women are sexual property, belonging to their fathers, brothers, and husbands. By leaving her husband, the woman threatens the gender code. The Levite follows her to his father-in-law's household to reclaim his property. His father-in-law, however, tries to persuade the Levite to remain in his household by wining and dining him for days. He stays in his father-in-law's household, remaining subordinate to another male's protection and giving up his autonomy like a woman.



On the return trip, the Levite and the woman find shelter in an old man's house in Gibeah. A mob of men surrounds the house, demanding, "Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have intercourse with him" (Judg. 19:22). The old man offers the mob his virgin daughter and the Levite's woman for ravishing. The mob declines the offer, and the Levite seizes his woman and pushes her out the door for their violent pleasure. The mob brutally rapes the woman, torturing her through the night and leaving her for dead in the morning. The escalating violence, however, does not end there. The Levite discovers the woman on the doorstep and tells her to "get up" so that they continue their journey. The text records her silence, implying her death. The Levite proceeds to dismember her body into twelve parts, burying her in the territories of the twelve tribes. This leads to tribal revenge and war against the men of Gibeah.

The men of Gibeah want the Levite, but they get a woman. The two impulses seem narratively to be at odds. The host promotes an androcentric ideology of deflecting the violence from the male guest: "Do it to the women, not to the male." The men of Gibeah want to humiliate the Levite in the most degrading way by womanizing or penetrating him through anal intercourse. But when we now read the story, we need to unmask how the honor/shame code surrounding hospitality to strangers is closely wedded to patriarchal ideology of gender and sexuality. Male penetrative sexuality is used as a social expression of subordinate status of women and a weapon to shame men.

When we examine the Hebrew scriptures, we find no identifiable notions of homosexual orientation. We do find several particular forms of same-sex representations of rape and gender code violations. We do not consider heterosexual rape as form of heterosexual sexual expression; neither can we designate homosexual rape in Genesis 19 as homosexual sex: "The generalized application of the rapists of the Genesis 19 story to modern gay/lesbian sexual practices is inappropriate reconstruction; there is a fallacy equating rape with consensual same-sex practices in Christian fundamentalist reading of the text." (31) No sensible heterosexual person would characterize rape as sexuality; it is violence, not sex. The real act of sodomy is the particular application of the story to translesbians and the translation of textual violence into social violence.

## The Christian Scriptures

There are no sayings of Jesus against same-sex relationships. Jesus inclusively accepted people; he had little to say about sexuality except for those few occasions where he condemned exploitation or double standards. If the churches spent as much time as Jesus did on sexuality, there would be a lot healthier congregations welcoming and not excluding folks based on sexual orientation. Jesus' focus in his ministry was on justice, love, and inclusion. He saw hypocrisy and injustice as far greater threats to the realm of God.

Paul, however, continues to present a problem for many translesbians. Some mainline churches and the religious right have used Paul to justify:

1. exclusion from churches and denial of ordination of "practicing homosexuals"
2. reparative therapies that attempt to change sexual orientation or gender transitions
3. legal discrimination in housing, employment, and the right to marry

We need to investigate these words in 1 Corinthians 6:9, wrongly translated for "homosexual": sodomite, pervert, or some abusive derivative; and what the real issue is in Romans 1:26-27. Christians churches have used the verses in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:26-27 to maintain that translesbigays will be eternally damned.

## 1 Corinthians 6:9

In 1 Corinthians 6:9, Paul writes, "Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals (*oute malakoi oute arsenokoitai*), nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers inherit the kingdom of God." Most commentators accept the fact Paul incorporated his vice list from already existing vice lists in Hellenistic Judaism. Paul's contemporary Philo of Alexandria uses lists of vices over a hundred times in his writings.

John Boswell was one of the first scholars to point out the multiple mistranslations of two words applied to homosexuality: *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. (32)

Malakos literally means "soft." Biblical scholar Robin Scroggs links the term malakos to an "effeminate call boy," to the one who is penetrated in anal intercourse. (33) There have been times fundamentalist Christians have applied this word malakos or "effeminate" to condemn transsexuals as well. The word malakos stresses softness against the hardness of masculinity. During the first century C.E., the masculinist ideology of the Greco-Roman world may have associated "softness" or "effeminacy" with men who submitted to passive anal intercourse in the gender roles of women. Yet there may have other associations in the ancient world lost to careless mistranslations and the equation to contemporary homosexuality.

Yale biblical scholar Dale Martin has provided the most conclusive evidence in arguing that it referred the entire complex of femininity and that effeminacy had no relation to male-to-male sexuality in the Greco-Roman world. He cites Pseudo-Aristotelian's *Physiognomy* which describes the as "delicate-looking, pale-complexioned and bright-eyed: their nostrils are wrinkled and they are prone to tears. These characters are fond of women and inclined to have female children." (34) Martin concludes, "In fact, malakos more often referred to men who prettied themselves up further heterosexual exploits." (35) It was often used as an epithet of insult for men who loved women too much and were sex addicts. They became effeminate by too much association with and their love for women.


  
 The diagram shows the Greek word "αρσενοκοιτης" (arsenokoites) in red. Two blue arrows point downwards from the word to the words "αρσενο" (arseno) and "κοιτης" (koites), which are also in red.

The second term, *arsenokoites*, is a Greek compound noun, composed of *arseno*, literally "man," and *koites* meaning "sleeping." One of my colleagues translates it as "couch potato." The problem with this term is that it is used only twice in the Christian scriptures (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) and that it ultimately remains obscure in its meaning within the Christian scriptures. There is outside use of the word that allows some limited speculation on the possible meaning of the word. In the Sibylline Oracle 2, "Do not steal seeds...Do not *arsenkoitein*, do not betray, do not murder," the term occurs in what Martin calls "economic sins, action related to economic injustice or exploitation." (36) Martin observes that *arsenkoitein* does not appear elsewhere in the text except where sexual sins are denounced. He finds a similar usage of *arsenokoites* in the Acts of John, where it is listed among sins related to economic injustice. In his *Refutation of All Heresies*, Hippolytus narrates how the evil angel Nass commits adultery with Eve and took Adam as his slave boy. Hippolytus uses the word *arsenokoitia* to denote Nass' relationship with Adam, implying that this is coercive and unjust use of another person sexually. Martin concludes from his survey of Greco-Roman and early



Christian literature that arsenkoites refers to "a particular role of exploiting others by means of sex, perhaps but not necessarily by homosexual sex." (37) For nearly a thousand years, Christians have committed violence to people attracted to the same sex and still brutalize them over the mistranslations of these words with obscured usages and meanings.

## Romans 1:26-27

In Romans 1:26-27, Paul speaks about the exchange (metallsasso) of natural for unnatural female and male homoerotic relationships. These verses form part of Paul's larger argument on Roman idolatry and functions as a prelude for arguing against judgmental Jewish critics. Paul uses the examples of the exchange of natural relations for his argument of idolatry and the consequences of changing the created order for disorder. In Paul's thinking, the exchange (*metallaxan*) of the Creator for a creature leads to women exchanging (*metallaxan*) natural intercourse (*ten physiken khresin*) for unnatural (*para physin*) and men likewise are giving up natural relations (*ten physiken khresin*) with women. For Paul, Gentiles have exchanged God for created things, resulting in disordered sexuality.



While many scholars believe that the exchange of natural sexual intercourse for unnatural intercourse refers in Romans 1:26-27 to some form of homoerotic relationships, some argue that the exchange refers to heterosexual "sexual perversion". John Boswell argues that heterosexually oriented people engage in homosexual acts. His use of modern sexual-identity templates has been criticized for their anachronistic application to ancient sexuality. (38) James Miller claims that the exchange refers to unnatural heterosexual oral or anal intercourse because Paul's culture did not have a linked concept of male and female homoeroticism. (39) Tom Hanks follows Miller's reading that Romans 1:26 refers to women engaging in anal sex with men to avoid procreation, but he sees that verse 1:27 is built on the Leviticus prohibitions against male-to-male, unprotected anal sex. (40)

In an different interpretative trajectory, Robin Scroggs comprehends the exchange as referring to relationships between an older man and a youth. While providing an excellent study of cultural pederasty in the Greco-Roman world, Scroggs' model fails to account fully for the verses on female homoeroticism and adult-male-to-adult-male homoeroticism. (41) He notes the rare mention of female homoeroticism within Jewish and Greco-Roman sources but fails to comprehend female homoeroticism within Paul's gender codes. L. William Countryman and Daniel Helminiak attempt to understand Romans 1:26-27 within the purity codes of Judaism. For Countryman, the homoerotic acts are an unclean part of Gentile culture, now insignificant in Christ. These homoerotic acts are not accorded Paul's judgment of deserving death (Rom. 1:32). (42) They are rhetorical means for articulating Gentile idolatry and uncleanness while later unpacking Jewish sinfulness. Paul affirms at the end of his letter: "I know and am persuaded in Lord Jesus nothing is unclean in itself, but is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean."

Helminiak wants to understand *para pysin* as "beyond nature," and he explores whether the verses in Romans might to refer to heterosexual non-procreative sex acts such as heterosexual intercourse during menstruation, having intercourse standing up, and oral or anal sex. (43) "Beyond nature" becomes unusual, out-of-the-ordinary sexual acts. Ultimately, Helminiak falls back to Countryman's purity thesis of homogenital acts as impure but not ethically wrong, but Paul uses this rhetorical structure to get past Jewish sensibilities of religious purity and superiority over Gentile impurity. For the above authors, Paul is trying to heal the split of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome; these theses are meant to rehabilitate Paul for the queer community.

Bernardette Brooten has convincingly argued that the issue of female homoeroticism is connected with Paul's perspective on gender codes. Her gender analysis undercuts the above male perspectives on Romans 1:26-27 and does not rehabilitate Paul. What Paul means by "exchanged natural relations for unnatural relations" means that "women exchanged the passive, subordinate sexual role for active autonomous role." (44) Martti Nissinen, likewise, affirms, "It was woman's active sexual role that was regarded as truly contrary to nature." (45) For men, such an exchange constitutes that men take a passive, subordinate sexual role like women in exchange for the normal role of the male penetrator. In the dominant Greco-Roman culture of the first century C.E., the penetrator and penetrated constitute foundational categories for the model of sexuality, and they are intertwined with the cultural gender codes.



Brooten comprehends the violations of female and male homoeroticism in light of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, where Paul describes a natural hierarchy: God, Christ, man, woman. He requires strict gender differentiation with hairstyle and headdress. Women are not to cut their hair short like men, while men are not to wear their hair long like women. Women's long hair is insufficient for marking gender difference. Paul requires the veiling of women's heads as well. Nissinen notes, "This hierarchical pattern was not invented by Paul but belonged to his culture. Gender role categories in the eastern Mediterranean, with culturally defined concepts of maleness and femaleness, masculinity and effeminacy, ... are not determined by anatomical sex only but also by an appropriate self-presentation and conformity to established gender roles." (46) Paul accepted the gender ideologies without question, and these were drawn from Hellenistic Judaism.

The issue at the heart of Romans 1:26-27 is the rigid gender codes Paul grew up with as a Pharisaic Jew and perhaps his own fears about his sexual drives. Paul is anxious of men with long hair and women with short hair because it confuses his rigid cultural understanding of maleness and femaleness. Paul fears a man who will be penetrated like a woman by another man. That man has betrayed his male status and privilege. Nissinen argues that Paul was familiar with *tribades*, women who have usurped the male position as penetrator or as top. Greco-Roman folklore had these women grow their clitoris into a penetrative phallus because they could not conceive sex outside of the penetrator/penetrated model. These women's transgressions involve their attempts to be like males, to be penetrators of women; thus, they have usurped a male social role. These transgressions confuse the created gender codes of males as active penetrators and women as passive receptors. These are Paul's personal opinions woven into his pastoral letter to the Romans. Many Christians no longer condone his acceptance of slavery nor his statements about women.

## Conclusion

At the heart of these texts misapplied to translesbigay folks is a deep misogyny, the hatred and fear of women. Contemporary homophobia is embedded in ancient misogynist gender codes that many of us no longer hold. The passive role of a male in anal intercourse is identified with the female role. Because of the view of women as sexual property and the dominant view of asymmetrical sexual relationships, a woman in an active role was culturally offensive. Both defied cultural codes of natural order, for it was natural in the Greco-Roman world for a free male to penetrate a boy, a male of lesser status, slave, or woman. It was unnatural for a free man to be penetrated by another free man or a male of lesser status or for a woman, without a penis or semen, to be penetrated by another woman. These cultural ideas were fused with a natural, creation theology within Hellenistic Judaism and later Christianity.



The Hebrew scriptures do not speak of anything remotely like female homoeroticism; nor do they mention male/female masturbation or male/female oral sex. There are only references to male-to-male anal intercourse in Leviticus 18:20, 22:13, and the violation is a gender transgression, a betrayal of the privilege of male status within a patriarchal culture that valued the male over the female. Nor does male rape have any of the features of contemporary gay male sexuality, relationality, mutuality, or love.

For many conservative Christians, Paul has been used as the final word on homosexuality. Many churches have used these mistranslations of arsenokoites and malakos to justify the exclusion of translesbigays from their congregations, to deny them ordination, and to refuse to bless and recognize their unions. The sin of Sodom has been magnified by such blatant and cruel inhospitality within many churches, and the translation into social policies of public discrimination and legitimizing a climate of public violence.

Many contemporary Christians object to Paul's views on women and his support of slavery in the Greco-Roman world. They have rejected his opinions on women and slavery as the word of God, realizing that these are his opinions, holding little weight in our contemporary Christian practices. Why many still cling to Paul's cultural opinions expressed in Romans 1:26-27 and ignore sound biblical interpretations of scholars has less to do with theological or biblical reasons and more to do with prejudicial motivations best left to the psychologist or therapist to explain.

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