

The question of whether there is a biblical theology of sexuality (and homosexuality in particular) demands a number of things. The very notion of being “biblical” implies that there is some form of coherence across the two testaments, or at least a clarity of development of thought within and across the two texts. It is this that I want to primarily focus on, not so much the individual prohibitions or permissions found in various books, but whether there is a consistency across the years, whether explicitly doctrinal or, as we will see, linguistic and etymological, which supports a coherent ethic.

My chief reference point is Gagnon’s “The Bible and Homosexual Practice” which to date is the definitive exegetical text on the subject. That is not to say that it is perfect, but rather that it encapsulates the majority of the debate and presents conclusive evidence for the traditional position.

For this Reason

That the creation text of Genesis 1-3 concentrates (in the J text) on the two sexes and their inter-relation is no mistake. The creation of humans as the climax of the 6 days is specific and designed to indicate superiority over the rest of creation. Specifically, man and woman are given a command not just to rule over the rest of creation, but to procreate humans themselves and to fill the earth (Gen 1:28) from the original couple. This is the point that Paul himself uses preaching to the Athenians (Acts 17:26) but it leads us to an initial question which is “Is procreation all sex is about?” An answer can actually be found in Genesis 2, for the reason Eve was created from Adam was not just to populate the earth but to provide a helper. The Hebrew here is עֵזֶר which can mean “help” or “succor”¹, and in this context means a companion to share life with. The companion is complementary to Adam, distinguished by sexual difference, but still human (the significance of the rib). As Gagnon puts it

“The story remains authoritative for conveying that the obvious complementarity (and concordant sexual attraction) of male and female witnesses to God’s intent for human sexuality. Male and female are ‘perfect fits’ from the standpoint of divine design and blessing. Male and male, or female and female are not”².

I want to say that this is almost a good statement of the situation, except for the phrase “and concordant sexual attraction”. To imply that mutual sexual attraction

¹ See for example Psalm 33:20, 121:1-2, 124:8 for the kind of “help” this implies – not just someone to pass logs while building a house but a support, one who carries one along

² Gagnon, R J; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; p62

is implicit in the text is to infer something that is not explicitly present. Rather, it's important to note that the complementarity which is described **and affirmed** here³ is not contingent on the attraction of the male to the female (and vice-versa) though that may be present. This is a point that needs to be clarified, for the Scripture is full of matches which are not in any sense driven by sexual attraction (though of course some are) and yet are validated as operating as marriage. For example, Jacob marries Leah, despite being attracted to her younger sister Rachel, has sex with her⁴ and continues to provide and care for her, **and** to procreate⁵.

It is the New Testament use of the Old when discussing marriage that convinces us that there is a coherent Biblical theology in this area. In particular, the New Testament moves beyond the Old Testament's advocacy of marriage on the grounds of procreation and companionship and adds in a third aspect, that marriage is a metaphor of spiritual truth, a symbol of Christ and his Church. This backs up the view of the Roman Catholic theologian Schillebeeckx that the Genesis texts are not just revealing the creation of man and woman but **also** their interdependence in a familial way:

“What cannot be justified from the texts is that Genesis as a whole merely refers to the creation of woman and man, and not directly to marriage. The

³ Genesis 2:24 and picked up by Paul in Eph 5:31

⁴ Genesis 29:32

⁵ Genesis 35:23

intention of the whole text was to restore the social fact of marriage to a divine institution.”⁶

This of course is also the intent of Jesus when speaking of marriage and divorce when he affirms the Genesis texts as providing a framework for monogamous life-long marriage⁷ and the same conclusion leads the Church of England report “Some Issues on Human Sexuality” to conclude about sex that:

“The description in Genesis 2 of a permanent exclusive union between one man and one woman ordained by God provides the benchmark by which to assess all the various forms of sexual activity and relationship that the Old Testament describes. In so far as these do not conform to the Genesis 2 pattern, they are to be seen, like all other forms of sin, as the outworking of the fractured relationship between humanity and God described in Genesis 3.”⁸

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery*; p46

⁷ Matthew 19:1-6

⁸ Harries et al; *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*; p95

It is an abomination

That the Old Testament Levitical texts condemn homosexual activity seems to be almost beyond doubt. The only debate that still exists seems to be what category the condemnation is, or to put it another way, what the words תועבה הוא⁹ mean. Gagnon makes the fascinating point that תועבה הוא is only ever applied to male-male sex in the Mosaic Law (Lev 18:22, Lev 20:13) though it is used extensively outside¹⁰. The words for male are “unqualified and absolute”¹¹ (זָכָר is used, the same word as in Genesis 1:27 for the phrase “male and female he made them”) and show the universality of the condemnation, evidenced by the almost lack of debate on what זָכָר means in the context.

Of more debate is the meaning of תועבה which Boswell says

“does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft (discussed elsewhere in Leviticus), but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation, both of which are prohibited in these same chapters ... the Levitical enactments against homosexual behaviour characterize it unequivocally as ceremonially unclean rather than inherently evil”.¹²

⁹ Leviticus 18:22

¹⁰ E.g. Gen 43:32, Deut 7:26, Jer 6:15, Eze 16:50

¹¹ Gagnon, R J; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; p115

¹² Boswell; *Homosexuality*; pp100,102

This appears at first convincing, but the use of תועבה elsewhere in the Old Testament presents a prohibition of more than cultic symbolism (for example Prov 28:9, Isai 41:24, Eze 18:12). In particular the use of תועבה in Proverbs 6:16 before the list of vices in verses 17 to 19 can hardly be called a description of cultic no-noes.

So, clear that תועבה is “abomination” in a strict universal sense, we can then see the development of an unitary theology of homosexual activity across the Old and New Testaments. The LXX rendering of Lev 18:12 is “καὶ μετὰ ἄρσενος οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ κοίτην γυναικός βδέλυγμα γάρ ἐστίν” and this becomes the linguistic basis for the inclusion in the vice list of “οὔτε ἀρσενοκοίται” by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9. That Paul has lifted the LXX language and produced a compounded noun is further backed by the understanding that the common Rabbinic phrase for homosexual actions was “מְשַׁכְּב זָכָר” which translates into the LXX “ἄρσενος κοίτην” almost perfectly, an obvious choice of words if Paul was schooled in the Rabbinic tradition.

Of more interest is the use of the root μαλακος in the LXX. It occurs in a number of places and each time is translated “soft” (e.g. at Prov 25:15¹³ and Job 41:3¹⁴) or

¹³ ἐν μακροθυμίᾳ εὐοδία βασιλεῦσιν γλώσσα δὲ μαλακὴ συντρίβει ὅσατᾰ

¹⁴ λαλήσει δὲ σοι δεήσει ἰκετηρίᾳ μαλακῶς

“delicacy” (26:22¹⁵). The Hebrew in the first two verses is רַךְ also meaning “soft” and in Prov 26:22 is לֶחֱמִים which is best translated as “the dainties” (in this case “the dainty morsels”) and appears only here in the Old Testament (as a repeat of Prov 18:8). These two words would fit the suggestion in Gagnon that:

“in Greek literature *malakoi* carries the broad sense of “the effeminate” ... for men, *malakoi* can denote such diverse things as a penchant for “soft” or decadent living, a fondness for expensive clothes and gourmet foods, excessive attention to the care of one’s hair, long hair, wearing perfume or make-up ... and acceptance of phallic penetration by another male.”¹⁶.

Gagnon himself wants the meaning of *malakoi* to lie “somewhere in between ‘only prostituting passive homosexuals’ and ‘effeminate heterosexual and homosexual males’.”¹⁷ which is backed up by the observation that:

“In 1 Cor 6:9 *malakoi* are sandwiched in between adulterers (people who commit an act of immoral sexual intercourse) and *arsenokoitai* (people who have something to do with an immoral act of same-sex intercourse). **Immoral sexual intercourse, then, would appear to be an identifying mark of the *malakoi*.**”¹⁸

So who then are the *malakoi* that are condemned in 1 Corinthians 6? I want to suggest that the meaning Paul seems to be using is not so much about a sexual act but rather that the *malakoi* are men who in some way **subvert** the maleness

¹⁵ λόγοι κερκώπων μαλακοί οἷτοι δὲ τύπτουσιν εἰς ταμίεια σπλάγχνων

¹⁶ Gagnon, R J; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; p307, reiterating Dale Martin

¹⁷ Gagnon, R J; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; p308

¹⁸ Gagnon, R J; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; p308

that they are called to, whether consciously or subconsciously, actively or reactively. There is though, some sense that they are “soft” on their maleness, and that this has something to do with immoral sexual activity, sandwiched as the word is in between μοιχοὶ and ἀρσενοκοῖται, the adulterers and those actively engaged in homosexual activity.

This may fit into the Romans 1 passage, which has Paul referencing men who “gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men”¹⁹. This is in the context of the subversion of the truth about God, and now brings into clarity, I believe, why Paul has chosen to use the word *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians, for where *malakoi* is used in the LXX it has the context of subversion (Prov 25:15 to change the mind of a ruler, Job 41:3 to challenge the power of the Leviathan used as a metaphor for challenging God, Prov 26:22 the destructive power of gossip).

In Romans 1:27 Paul uses the phrase ὀρέξει αὐτῶν to describe the passion which drives the homosexual activity which the men and women are engaged in. Though the root ὀρέξεις does not appear in the main body of the Old Testament, it does appear in the Apocrypha and provides a number of interesting observations. It appears in 4 Mac 1:33, 1:35; Wis 14:2, 15:5; Sir 18:30, 23:6 and in all these cases is presented as an incorrect lusting, an appetite that should not be fulfilled. It is not the case in these passages that the thing lusted for is good

¹⁹ Romans 1:27, ESV

for some and bad for others, rather the admonition of the lusting applies to all. This would therefore fit in with the traditional argument that the homosexual prohibition in Romans 1 is generic, not specific to “natural heterosexuals”.

And this leads us to understand that essentially Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 are actually saying the same thing, just using different language to do so. In particular, Paul appears in both places to have made specific linguistic references to the LXX Old Testament in order to make theological points of consistency with the earlier revelation and that those linguistic references were not obscure but in commonly read and known portions (in particular Torah and Wisdom), providing a coherency across the Biblical divide of Old and New. The fact that the Fathers consistently interpreted the passages in this traditional way adds to the picture that this understanding was accepted as authoritative from the beginning of the church until the attempts at revision in the 20th Century.

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