

# Biblical Views of Sexuality and Homosexuality

by Rev. Barbara Swartzel Anderson

## Hebrew Scripture view of sexuality

Human sexuality is a part of creation, which God declares very good. We are created male and female in the image of God. It is in our capacity for relationship, specifically sexual relationship that we understand what it means to be created in God's image. (Genesis 1:26-31) This is the root of the contemporary Jewish understanding that it is a "mitzvah"-- a good deed, for husband and wife to make love on the Sabbath, for in doing so they are participating with God in creation.

In Genesis 2, woman is a "helper" suitable for man-- a term otherwise only used of God; not ever used to describe a lesser status individual in a hierarchal relationship.

Song of Solomon is a celebration of God's gift of sexuality. Interestingly, the couple described here is not identified in any way; they are not specifically described as husband and wife.

In the fall, the entrance of sin in the world is manifested in sexuality as well as other parts of life: nakedness brings shame, pain in childbirth, woman's desire for her husband, he will rule over her. We no longer have a relationship of equality and mutuality. (Genesis 3)

## Marriage in Hebrew Scriptures

Genesis 2:24: "A man leaves his father and mother, and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." In the midst of this reality, we have no definition of marriage, no criteria, and no standards are spelled out. Marriage tended to reinforce kinship ties; both Abraham and Isaac went back to the old country for wives for their sons. However, Esau married a local woman, and Naomi's sons married Moabite women.

For much of Biblical history, both polygamy and concubinage were accepted practices. One man and as many women as he could manage or afford, would be a more accurate description of marriage in Biblical times than the commonly cited one man and one woman.

Marriage was fundamentally a property relationship. A woman belonged to her father, was given to her husband, and after his death, she became the property of her son. The organizing structure for Israelite society was the hierarchal, patriarchal, family. Law, specifically, property code, functioned to support and uphold the strength of the family, to prevent people from dishonoring the family, and the father as its head. Property code prohibits adultery and incest, essentially as theft of a man's property, either wife or daughter (who was rendered unmarriageable). A woman could be divorced at a man's will and sent home to her own family; she never became a full part of her husband's family.<sup>i[1]</sup> A woman, as property, was not able to commit adultery, by definition.<sup>ii[2]</sup>

## Jesus and Marriage

Jesus radically transformed this understanding of marriage. Instead of family as the structure for society, the reign of God is what is central. The issue is not upholding the family, but Christian discipleship; even the family is subordinate to that.<sup>iii[3]</sup>

Jesus refused to take sides in the debate of his day over whether divorce was only allowed if the bride had not been a virgin on the marriage, and thus no marriage had actually taken place (the strictest interpretation of the law) or whether divorce could be allowed for sexual wrongdoing, or

even on general terms; but only a man could initiate a divorce (since a wife was property). Instead, he looked at creation, and declared that a husband and wife became one flesh, and they both participate equally in the image of God. Therefore, divorce was not part of God's intention from creation, and marriage was indissoluble for any reason. He also made it clear that not everyone could accept this understanding (Matt. 19:11-12). Because husband and wife were equally God's image, Jesus also made it possible for women to commit adultery.<sup>iv[4]</sup>

## **Paul and Marriage**

Paul upholds Jesus' teaching, further arguing that no radical changes in lifestyle are to be made (including marriage, if that is possible) because the current age will end soon and the end of time will come. Paul continues to think in the category of property relationships, but argues that the primary relationship is that all Christians belong to Jesus Christ, and all other relationships are subordinate. This is the context of his comments about sexuality, which he addresses in 1 Corinthians 5-7. While some in the Corinthian church were apparently arguing for celibacy as a new purity code, claiming that as superior to marriage, Paul strongly disagrees, and gives sexual desire as a legitimate, appropriate reason to marry; and in an absolutely radical statement calls for husbands to give wives their conjugal rights! (1 Cor. 7:1-7).

## **Condemnation of Idolatrous Pagan practices**

One of the issues for Israelite society was influence of the cultures around them, including sexual behavior which was related to the surrounding fertility cults. Because these were fertility cults, the sexual behavior which is condemned as a part of idolatry is primarily, but certainly not exclusively, heterosexual behavior, with both male and female cult prostitutes<sup>v[5]</sup>. This behavior is labeled an abomination, related to the same word used in parts of the purity code.

## **Legal Code**

There are a wide variety of legal materials in the Bible. The 10 commandments are the first example we think of, but they are best understood as a set of inclusive, summary principles, rather than as a specific law code. The principles set forth do not have the specifics which spell out which actions are violations (i.e. how do we define coveting?) or how those violations are penalized; other, more specific legal codes in the Bible spell out those specifics within the community.

Other specific bodies of legal code can be identified within the Bible, and they can be best understood by identifying when these codes were developed and codified (a task most of us rightly leave to Biblical scholars). Because these law codes are a commentary on the times in which they were set forth, they filled specific purposes when they were written.<sup>vi[6]</sup>

The various legal codes within the Bible tend to focus on two basic concerns. One is property relationships, which included the organization of family life, including marriage, since marriage was seen as a property relationship. The second concern was purity: who was part of the community and who was not. Purity regulations in legal code primarily focused on what went into the body, thus were focused on dietary restrictions and sexual conduct, with many behaviors included in purity code restrictions. Some behaviors were common occurrences which rendered the person involved as unclean, and which could be cleansed by prescribed rituals. There were other practices which were matters of aesthetics, or cultural or moral repugnance. Behaviors in all these categories were labeled an abomination. Still others were more serious and the consequences were separation from the community in some way, either temporarily, permanently, or by death.

## **Homosexuality and the Bible**

In regard to the specific issue of homosexuality, in examining the Biblical material, there are no clear, definitive answers which all scholars would concur on. Words that could be translated homosexual or homosexuality do not appear at all in the Bible. There is no clear unambiguous statements that show an understanding in the Bible of what we understand to be same sex orientation (as opposed to behavior). However, there are some passages which are frequently cited.

### **Narrative passages which contain possible references to homosexual behavior**

**Genesis 19** - Angels came to visit Sodom, and the townspeople wanted to rape them. This led to the subsequent order for Lot to flee from Sodom before God destroyed it. It is highly likely that this story condemns the violation of Middle Eastern hospitality ethics or violence. The Letter of Jude, in a rather cryptic reference, suggests that Sodom and Gomorrah were condemned for sexual immorality and unnatural lust. This specific verse (Jude 7) is part of a larger section which talks about fallen angels (that story is in the non-canonical book of 1 Enoch 6-8), and then compares others-- who condemn what they do not understand-- to these fallen angels. This whole passage in Jude is very difficult to understand, but is likely a reference to angels (sons of God) who married humans (Genesis 6:1-4). This evil was the final wickedness cited before God chose to destroy the earth with the flood. Thus, lusting after unnatural flesh is a reference to sex with angels, not homosexuality.<sup>vii[7]</sup> In contrast to the obscure reference in Jude, Jesus declared that Sodom was condemned because it did not practice hospitality (Matt. 10:14-15 and Luke 10:10-12).

**Judges 19** - A Levite (priest) was traveling through the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, and stopped in the city of Gibeah to spend the night, rather than a non-Israelite city. After sitting in the town square for some time, he was finally offered hospitality by an old man; however, the residents of the town wanted to rape him. The man who took him in instead gave his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine to the other townsmen. The issue here is again the violation of the hospitality ethic and violence rather than homosexuality.

**David and Jonathan** - Beginning at 1 Samuel 19, we have the accounts of David as part of the court of Saul, and his relationship with Saul's son Jonathan, who "took great delight in David (1 Sam 19:1). Even when Saul was seeking to kill David as a rival, in the midst of a civil war, Jonathan was loyal to David, ascertained his father's intentions, and passed word on to David. Saul pursued David, seeking to kill him for the rest of 1 Samuel, and in chapter 31 Saul (and Jonathan, though that is not clear until 2 Samuel 1) are killed by the Philistines. David's mourning song for Jonathan includes "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan, greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Samuel 1:26).

Nowhere in this story is it explicitly stated that David and Jonathan had a sexual relationship; however, the intensity of the relationship, and the nuances of the relationship between Saul and Jonathan can lead to well founded suggestions that, while both David and Jonathan had sexual relationships with women, they may also have had an ongoing sexual relationship, with both being bisexual, or one or the other primarily homosexual<sup>viii[8]</sup>.

### **Legal code**

#### **The 10 commandments do not condemn homosexuality or address it in any way.**

The passages in Hebrew Scripture which condemn homosexual behavior are part of purity code restrictions, which by and large we regard as not normative for contemporary culture. These were requirements that separated the people of Israel from the cultures around them, practices that identified them as belonging to God, and insured their survival and growth as a people. One critical piece of this survival was population growth, thus any practices that thwarted procreative sexual expression were prohibited. Our Jewish brothers and sisters no longer practice the animal sacrifices that were defined in the purity code as an essential part of the community's relationship with God. In addition, we eat pork and shellfish, mix meat and milk, wear clothes of mixed fibers,

and plant different crops in the same field. We no longer regard intercourse during a menstrual period as an abomination. This is generally a portion of the Bible which tells us how the people of Israel lived, but we do not regard most of the prohibited actions as ones that we must follow. How can we say that some can be disregarded, and others are still binding on us—on what basis do we make distinctions?

### **The Holiness Code**

(Leviticus 17-26) was codified in the time of the exile in Babylon. One of the key identifying features of this section of legal code is the understanding that specific behavior would cause the land to spew the people out. It may well have been written as a way of explaining why the people of Israel had been removed from the land they were given, and were in exile in Babylon. It can then be seen as a sort of cultic “I told you so” that lifts up behaviors that would have led to their capture. Any sexual behavior which did not produce offspring would have reduced population growth, and thus led to the land spewing them out. The Holiness Code suggested that the land itself would take cleansing action by expelling those who did not belong, because they were not part of the chosen people, either because they were non-Israelite, or acted like non-Israelites. We cannot assume that acts that are labeled abominations in the Holiness code section of purity code are unable to be cleansed (for other portions of purity code spell out cleansing action), even if we were to regard these as law which is normative for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. The specific prohibitions, “you shall not lie with a man as with a woman” (Leviticus 18:22; repeated in Leviticus 20:13), falls within this Holiness code section of the purity code. The land would expel those who did this because non-procreative sex would not build up the nation and make it possible for them to continue to hold it in the face of hostile neighbors.<sup>x[9]</sup>

### **Jesus and purity code**

We do not regard purity code as normative for us because of Jesus’ attitudes. He radically changed the standards through his words and actions. He ate with gentiles and sinners, and welcomed women, even daring to ask a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. He made any demand for physical purity secondary to the demand for internal purity, looking to people’s hearts and their intention to do good or harm. What was required was to be attentive to love and justice, rather than to be obedient to the finest points of the purity laws.<sup>x[10]</sup>

### **Purity code and the early church**

Also, the role of purity code was a matter of great debate for the early church, as the church expanded beyond Israel and incorporated gentiles who were not bound to Israelite purity code (see Acts 15). The decision of the church was that those who were not Jews were not obligated to keep the purity code (Acts 15:29). The Apostle Paul strongly supported and argued for the same stance throughout all his writings. Jewish Christians were welcome to continue to follow the practices detailed in the purity code themselves, but were not to impose it on others.

### **Property code**

Because property code focused on inheritance issues, homosexuality is not addressed in this material. Remembering the culture of the ancient near east, both women and children were regarded as property, and their treatment was the prerogative of the patriarch of the family.

### **Jesus and homosexuality**

There is **no place in the Bible** where Jesus specifically addresses the issue of homosexuality.

It is highly likely that the servant/slave of the centurion whom Jesus healed (Luke 7:1-10; Matt. 8:5-13) was actually essentially a pre-pubescent boy who was homosexual sex slave; this was not merely a common feature of Greek life, it was a position of great favor. The centurion’s faith

is commended, his sexual exploitation (for that it what is feels like to us) is not mentioned at all, either positively or negatively.<sup>x[i11]</sup>

## Paul and homosexuality

The apostle Paul is extraordinarily clear about the reality that our Christian faith is not based on our keeping the law; he declares that a desire to be justified by keeping the law cuts us off from the grace which is ours in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3). We are not saved by our actions; we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. The law condemns us all. In the debate about whether the law must be kept by all, including gentiles, in the early church, Paul was unambiguously on the side of those who argued that those who were not Jewish had no obligation to live by the provisions of the law.

**1 Corinthians 6:9-10** is one part of a larger passage in 1 Corinthians where Paul is responding to a wide variety of behavior in Corinth which Paul condemns as inappropriate for Christians. Chapters 5 and 6 specifically address several issues: a man sexually involved with his father's wife (ch 5), Christians suing other Christians in civil court, rather than turning to the church to resolve conflict (ch 6:1-8), and people who are visiting prostitutes (ch 6:12-20). The general list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God includes a variety of vices, not only homosexual practice.

**Romans 1:23-27** is one portion of a complex argument for salvation that begins the letter, and continues through chapter 3. Paul begins with a condemnation of gentile unbelief, stating that God is revealed so clearly in creation that even gentiles with no knowledge of the law have any excuse. Because they refuse to worship God, they fall into idolatry. In judgment for idolatry, "God gave people up to degrading passions" either between women and men, or between men. The issue here is that because people refused to acknowledge God, they were consumed by the search for pleasure, and were sucked into pagan idolatrous practice. That would include the prevalent sexual slavery/exploitation of boys by older men, which was a commonly accepted pattern of homosexual activity in first century Greek culture, (such as the centurion). It also may have included a generally experimental, casual sexual morality, perhaps tied to pagan practice, which also included heterosexual practices that would preclude pregnancy. Paul's argument expands in chapter 2 when he condemns anyone who passes judgment on others, saying that this judgment is as worthy of condemnation as the gentile idolater; anyone who makes judgment based on the law proclaims that we are all bound by the law, thus we are all condemned, because we are all guilty of breaking the law. Salvation comes for all of us through redemption in Christ Jesus. The climax of this argument is "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24)." Not only idolaters and those who stand in judgment of them, but every one of us is only redeemed by the power of Jesus Christ. Attempts to follow the law only condemn us.

The key words in both these passages, and also in the list of the lawless and disobedient who were given the law in **1 Timothy 1:9-10** are two uncommon and difficult to understand words in Greek: μάλακοί (malakoi) and ἀρσενοίται (arsenokoitai). Malakoi is a plural form of a word meaning soft, which is used to describe an soft, elegant robe worn by royalty (Matt 11:8 and Luke 7:25). When it is used to describe people it refers to those who are dissolute, debauched, of weak moral fiber.<sup>xii[12]</sup> Arsenokoitai has not been found in any known Greek text that predates Paul, and appears to be a combination of two words: arseno- which means male or masculine, and -koi tai which means "ones who go to bed with." This might be a translation of the phrase used in Leviticus מִשְׁכַּב זָכָר (mishkav zakur)-- lying with a male--or it might refer specifically to male cult prostitutes.<sup>xiii[13]</sup> English translations vary in how they handle these words, some carry the ambiguity, and others interpret it in various ways. We cannot make judgments based on the English words we routinely read; even when we to return to the original Greek we cannot be certain of the specific practices that are being condemned. This is language that is not common

either in Scripture or in other writing from this period—that makes it difficult for even scholars to determine exactly what is being condemned. They may indeed be referring to some sort of homosexual practice (particularly arsenokoitai), but even if it is, it might be cult prostitution, thus tied to idolatry.

## Eunuchs in the Bible

In the ancient near east, there were men who often served and guarded the women's quarter in royal households, or who were high officials who were eunuchs (the Greek word *eunuch* means keeper of the couch). The term eunuch was frequently used of men who had been castrated (which would have been done to those who were given responsibility for caring for women for other men). However, ancient literature does recognize others who were also called eunuchs, who were referred to as *natural* or *born* eunuchs, who were sexually interested in men. These references from the Kama Sutra, Greek and Latin literature, and the Babylonian Talmud, point to some understanding that may suggest what we now understand as homosexual orientation.<sup>xiv[14]</sup>

In Israelite society, these people would have been on the fringes of the community, and not allowed to serve as priests (Leviticus 21:20) or even participate in Israelite worship (Deuteronomy 23:1), because they were regarded as impaired or defective.<sup>xv[15]</sup>

Jesus discusses eunuchs when the subject of divorce arose, and he lists people who should not marry: “there are who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made so by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:11-12).” “Those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” is most likely metaphorical, suggesting voluntary celibacy, but the other two categories suggest those who have been castrated, and those who are *natural* or *born* eunuchs; i.e. men with an innate homosexual orientation.<sup>xvi[16]</sup>

## For those of us who are heterosexual

We may not always agree completely on what some of these specific texts say about homosexuality and how they should be applied in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are Biblical scholars who disagree on this.

In spite of these differences, the Bible is abundantly clear that we have a responsibility to God for our own relationship with God, and are not to pass judgment on others. Paul's argument in Romans 1-3 is clear on that, and so are Jesus' words that we are to take the log from our own eye before seeking to remove a speck from another's eye (Matthew 7:1-5). Jesus also welcomed people who were outcasts of society: tax collectors and public sinners. He did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, and sent her accusers away by asking which of them was without sin (John 8:1-11). We clearly follow the teaching of Scripture, and the example of Jesus when we allow those who hold different understanding than we do to hold to their understanding, reserving judgment for God alone, who has the authority to judge both belief and actions.

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<sup>i[1]</sup> L. William Countryman, Dirt, Greed, & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 151.

<sup>ii[2]</sup> Countryman, p. 147-167.

<sup>iii[3]</sup> Countryman, p. 188.

<sup>iv[4]</sup> Countryman, p. 168-189.

<sup>v[5]</sup> Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study, study manual second edition, Richard Byrd Wilke and Julia Kitchens Wilke (Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>vi[6]</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, Making Sense of the Bible: Literary Type as an Approach to Understanding (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 66-72).

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- vii[7] Rev. Jeff Miner and John Tyler Connoley, The Children are Free (Indianapolis: Jesus Metropolitan Community Church, 2002), p. 7.
- viii[8] Miner and Connoley, pp. 33-39.
- ix[9] Countryman, p.32.
- x[10] Countryman, p. 178.
- xi[11] Miner and Connoley, pp. 47-51.
- xiii[12] Charles D. Myers, Jr, Ph.D, Homosexuality and the Bible: A Consideration of Pertinent Passages, pp 5-8. Published as "What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality" in ANIMA: The Journal of Human Experience 19:1 (fall, 1992) pp. 47-56.
- xiii[13] Myers, pp. 5-8.
- xiv[14] Miner and Connoley, pp. 40-44.
- xv[15] C. U. Wolf, "Eunuch" Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 179-80.
- xvi[16] Miner and Connoley, p.p. 45-46.

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