

SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS AND SCRIPTURE

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Introductory Remarks

The task we have been set this afternoon is to examine those biblical texts, remarkably few in number, that have a bearing on the subject of homosexual relationships. Before we do so, however, we need to remember that it is impossible to do justice to a subject that has been thoroughly debated over a significant period of time, in one short afternoon session. The best one is able to do is to provide an introduction to the biblical material, and endeavour to give a brief, honest, and objective exegesis of these texts as a basis for further study and discussion. The Diocese has prepared a useful, although by no means comprehensive, set of documents to provide a starting point for those who wish to pursue the matter in more detail. It is also important to remember that the primary source of authority for doctrine and practice in all provinces of the Anglican Church is Scripture. Having said that, however, we are confronted by the problem that the Jewish and Christian scriptures are very unlike the Qu'ran which Muslims believe was verbally dictated to the prophet Mohammed by the angel Gabriel, and will be protected by God against any corruption. Both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament are human products compiled or written over many years, and conditioned by the cultural assumptions, and historical circumstances that existed from the Middle Eastern Bronze Age to the Roman period a thousand or more years later. Nonetheless, Scripture is the norm of faith, and the norm by which all other norms are judged, whether they be creeds, confessions, or traditions.

Scripture acts for us as a set of guidelines, rather than dogmatic prescriptions. C. S. Lewis remarked in one of his books that Scripture acts as a signpost, pointing us in the right direction with regard to faith, and with regard to behaviour. This, in fact, is all Scripture claims for itself. The author of Second Timothy affirms that the role of Scripture (in this context, the Hebrew Bible) is twofold – the correction of error, and training in right conduct (2 Tim 3:15). We have many situations in the modern world which are not covered by the specifics of Scripture, and we have to move beyond its specific commands and demands. However, one thing about which we must be very careful is not to fill the gaps left by Scripture with our own dogmatic preconceptions. We are all too quick to adopt the posture that there are two sides to every argument, mine and the wrong one! We need to go about our task in a dispassionate manner, distinguishing what the biblical writers actually said, and what they actually meant, from what we would have liked them to have said or meant. In other words, we must examine words and meanings within their context, not only in Scripture, but also in the world of their time, their culture, their historical background, and so forth. Scripture, as any other writing, is culturally and temporally conditioned, and to ignore that leads us into the blind alley of fundamentalist literalism and legalism. We are required, therefore, to make a distinction between what the biblical text actually says in

respect of its original context, and what it may mean for the Christian community today; that is the very real difference between exegesis of the text and the task of hermeneutics. Always, however, we have to ask ourselves, what kind of imperative in action do the acts of God, to which Scripture bears witness, require from us?

With these preliminary comments to set the scene, we are now in a position to look in some detail at the passages of Scripture that have a bearing on the issue of same sex relationships. Much has been written on this issue, and I have no doubt that there will be much more before Anglicans arrive at any sort of consensus, should, in fact, that goal ever be reached. As with any subject about which there are strongly held, but widely different opinions, arguments tend all too often to be emotive, and generate far more heat than light. We need, therefore, to come to the matter in the spirit that Peter, our vicar, outlined in his sermon of a few weeks ago – we need grace, integrity, and respect in our dealings with one another, and, I think of equal importance, honesty in our handling of the biblical data. At all costs we must avoid the situation described in the parody of the children's hymn: “Wonderful things in the Bible I see, some put there by you, and some by me!”

The Hebrew Bible

1 The Creation Narratives

Any New Testament perspective on homosexuality is inevitably anchored firmly in the Hebrew Bible, as well as Jewish tradition. I suggest that the creation stories of the first two chapters of Genesis provide a framework for interpreting the whole of biblical teaching, not only in respect of homosexuality, but on sexual relationships in general. We do not read these stories as literal accounts of the way in which the world and its inhabitants came into being, but they do set out concepts that colour the rest of biblical teaching. The first creation story at Genesis 1:26–27 affirms that God made human beings in his own image. Whether this “image” was understood literally in anthropomorphic terms is not clear from the context, although with a background in the Bronze Age, it is likely that this was the way it was understood. What is clear, however, is that the editor of Genesis understood this image of God to be reflected in two distinct genders, male and female. This clear distinction between man and woman is underlined in the second creation narrative found in Genesis 2:18–25. The physical difference between a man and a woman is the basis of the sexual union of one woman and one man in marriage, and consequently forms the basis for procreation, the primary focus for sexual relationships in all cultures, something that modern thought has increasingly sidelined. The creation narrative, then, functions as the paradigm for males and females, and how they are to relate to one another sexually. The implication, which I suggest is unavoidable, is that marriage and sexual relations are to be understood as restricted to the opposite sex, from which it follows that same sex relations would be contrary to the created order as this is set out in the creation narratives. Gordon Wenham¹ has argued that it is highly likely, in fact, that it was the creation stories

1 Wenham, Gordon J. The Old Testament attitude to homosexuality, *Expository Times* 102 (1991): 359-62. So also

themselves that provided the basis for the strong aversion to homosexual behaviour that characterised Hebrew society, something that stood in marked contrast to the practices of ancient Near Eastern society in general.

2 Lot's Guests in Sodom

The story about Lot's guests and the reaction of the local mob, together with the resultant judgment on the city (Gen 19:1-11), has frequently been taken as illustrating God's active displeasure with even the threat of homosexual behaviour. That the local mob were intent on gang rape seems impossible to deny. Nonetheless, in a book that had a great deal of influence some years ago, D. S. Bailey argued that the use of the verb "know" should be understood in its general meaning rather than as a euphemism for having sex with a person, and the sin of the men of Sodom was in reality xenophobia, an attitude consistently condemned in Scripture.² The case is weak, particularly as the same verb is used a few verses later when Lot offers to bring out his daughters for the mob, if they would leave his guests alone. The sexual context in the latter situation cannot be denied, and the verb is used in the same way of a similar gang rape in the town of Gibeah in the book of Judges (19:22-25). That the men of Sodom were intent on homosexual rape is given further support in traditional Jewish interpretation of the passage. For example the *Testament of Naphtali*, one of the collection of apocryphal books known as *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and dating from the Second Temple period, comments, "But you, my children, shall not be like that: discern the Lord who made all things, so that you do not become like Sodom, which departed from the order of nature" (*T. Naph.* 3.4). Similarly, in the New Testament, Jude refers to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrha as "going after strange flesh" (Jude 7), which, given the context, can refer only to homosexual practices.

So far, so good, but was the judgment of Sodom the direct result of homosexual practices within the community, or was there something else that incurred God's judgment? Wenham remarks that the fundamental sin in this situation was not homosexuality *per se*, although "undoubtedly the homosexual intentions of the inhabitants of Sodom adds a special piquancy to their crime."³ The issue would appear to be much more the attempted sexual assault, together with actions that completely flouted the basic rules of hospitality, and the giving of shelter to strangers. Whenever Sodom is mentioned in Scripture it represents lawlessness and injustice, of which sexual licence is but a part. The actions of the men of Sodom merely served to emphasise its general state of moral degradation, and ethical disintegration. It has to be said, therefore, that this story is essentially irrelevant to our modern debate about homosexual relationships, although such relationships are clearly viewed in a negative fashion in the story, as later commentators make clear.

Gagnon, Robert A. J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon Press, Nashville. 2001). 56–62.

2 Bailey, Derrick Sherwin, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. (Archon Books, Hamden CT. 1975). 1-28

3 Wenham, Gordon J. *op cit.* 361

3 The Mosaic Legal Code

Two passages in the Levitical “Holiness Code” (Lev 18:22 and 20:13) are unequivocal in their condemnation of male homosexual acts, and they represent the sole instances in the Hebrew Bible where activity of this nature is put within a regulatory framework. Such relationships are described as “an abomination” or “detestable,” for which the death penalty is prescribed. The Hebrew word translated “abomination” (*to'evah*) is used sparingly in the Hebrew Bible, and may denote both religious and non-religious activity. Some scholars, therefore, have considered that the Levitical prohibitions were aimed specifically at pagan temple prostitution, something that was very common in the ancient world (biblical examples occur at 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46). The contrasts were thus between the religion of Israel, and the pagan religions around, in other words the context is cultic.

This simple division between cultic (ceremonial religious) and ethical/moral actions does not stand up to scrutiny, however. The activity of the worshipping community, and the actions of everyday behaviour cannot be separated in this way, as life was not compartmentalised as it is so often today. An examination of the various commands in Leviticus 18 demonstrates that the major emphasis is ethical and moral, on matters such as marriage, sexual chastity, and incest. Homosexual behaviour is condemned in the same breath as adultery and incest, and a balanced consideration of the context of these stringent prohibitions would support the view that the application is much wider than pagan temple prostitution. Indeed, the use of “purity language” in ancient Israelite culture with regard to a wide range of activities such as incest, adultery, male homosexuality, idolatry, economic exploitation, and so forth, emphasises the moral focus that underlies the prohibitions on activities that were understood to be not merely inherently degrading in themselves, but were utterly degrading (an “abomination”) in the eyes of God. It would seem very likely that this attitude arose from an understanding that homosexual relations were incompatible with God's design for the created order. Males and females were created as distinct and complementary sexual beings, and this distinction must remain inviolate. The Dutch theologian and philosopher Pim Pronk, himself a homosexual, has summarised the situation with regard to these texts from the Hebrew Bible as follows: “Our conclusion, therefore, has to be that the Old Testament pronounces itself very rarely, but then exclusively with disapproval, on homosexual acts and nowhere provides points of contact for a more positive attitude.”⁴ Male homosexual acts are thus understood in the Hebrew Bible as being among the greatest infringements of God's will, and deserving of the death penalty. It would appear that no other ancient Near Eastern culture adopted such a rigorous opposition to, and such severe sanctions against, all forms of homosexual activity.⁵

4 Pronk, P. *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation regarding Homosexuality*. (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993). 271.

5 Gagnon, Robert A. J. *op cit.* 44-56

The New Testament

It is important, when coming to a consideration of the New Testament texts, to recognise that Jesus, and the writers of the New Testament are heirs of the Jewish tradition, and the Jewish interpretive tradition, without exception, indicted homosexuality. Hence, the real question is whether the New Testament writers departed from the tradition they inherited. Although the references to homosexual behaviour are very few, without exception they condemn such behaviour. There are two passing references to Sodom in 2 Peter and Jude in the New Testament, but no other explicit references to homosexual behaviour occur other than in three brief comments in the writings of Paul. In this respect it is of particular interest that Jesus nowhere mentions the subject specifically, other than to reinforce the order of creation as the basis for sexual relationships (eg Mark 10:6-7). For Jesus, as for all observant Jews, the male-female pattern of sexual relationships defined the will of God. In passing, it should be noted that the remarks about “eunuchs” (Matt 19:12) are universally agreed to have no bearing on the subject, but relate to those who practice chastity in order to be able to concentrate solely on matters affecting the kingdom of God. The teaching of Jesus, therefore, provides guidance on only general principles of sexual relationships. However, it is worth noting that his approach to those designated “sinners” was always inclusive. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was to be made up of outsiders, those who had been socially ostracised or ritually excluded from the worshipping community of Israel by virtue of their actions, their livelihoods, or their diseases. Having said that, however, it is also important to remember that Jesus expected genuine repentance shown in action whenever this was necessary.⁶ The woman caught in adultery was commanded to “sin no more,” the tax collector was expected to make restitution, and in view of Jesus's acceptance of the ethical requirements of Torah, it would seem unlikely that he would have been particularly lax with regard to homosexual behaviour. The fact is that the issue does not seem to have arisen during his ministry, probably because such behaviour was rare in Palestinian Judaism, in contrast to the Hellenistic world.

There are, however, three passages in the body of documents traditionally ascribed to Paul that unequivocally refer to homosexual behaviour. Two (1 Cor 6:9-10 and Rom 1:18-32) occur in what are universally considered to be genuine Pauline letters, and the third (1 Tim 8:10) from a letter generally, although not universally, considered to be written by a later disciple of Paul towards the end of the first century.

1 Male Homosexual Activity

The references to male homosexuality at 1 Cor 6:9-10 and 1Tim 8:10 are clear in their condemnation. The passage in 1 Corinthians excludes those guilty of such behaviour from the kingdom of God. At the same time, however, Paul also excludes thieves, the covetous, drunkards, swindlers, and others guilty of immoral and antisocial behaviour that he summed up as “wicked.” Homosexuality was thus not singled out, but simply formed one aspect of

⁶ See the full discussion in Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. (SPCK, 1996).

those forms of human behaviour that are completely incompatible with the rule of God. The issue, however, is not quite as simple as at first glance. What sort of behaviour is actually being condemned here? Is it same sex relations in general, or is it a specific form of such relationships?

Paul used two words that have been the source of considerable debate. The first is *malakoi*, translated as “sodomites” by NRSV, and the second is *arsenokoitai*, translated as “male prostitutes” by NRSV. The first word has a normal everyday meaning of “soft,” but it was also used by the Classical authors to denote someone who was morally weak, and was used as an epithet for someone who was effeminate. In this context it almost certainly referred to youths who dressed as women, and sold themselves as passive partners in pederastic relationships. It has been translated “effeminate call-boy” by Robin Scroggs.⁷ This was probably the commonest form of homosexuality in the Graeco-Roman world, and Philo, the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who was a slightly older contemporary of Paul, was particularly scathing about the “rent boys” of Alexandria, also using the term *malakia* to describe their degeneracy. The second word is an unusual word that occurs very rarely in Greek literature, and was essentially slang, almost gutter Greek. Paul was not averse to using slang terminology when it suited his purpose, and his use of the term appears to be its first occurrence in Greek literature. Many scholars agree with David Wright who is almost certainly correct in suggesting that Paul derived the term from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.⁸ The word then has the meaning of a male who had sexual relations with another male, and specifically relates to the one who took the active part.

The context of Paul's strictures demonstrates that he is concerned with all forms of illicit sexual relationships, not merely those that were homosexual, and there is an equally strongly worded condemnation of prostitution. The two words used in connection with male homosexual relations, however, suggest strongly that the situation envisaged is one of the buying of sexual partners, probably through the local pagan temples, in a broad context of the lax morals of a bustling sea port where anything goes. Homosexuals were put in the same basket as idolators, adulterers, thieves, drunkards, revilers, and robbers, as the sort of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God. It is not possible, however, to conclude that the only acts in view here relate to pederasty or temple prostitution as some have argued. It would seem more likely that all forms of male homosexual behaviour were in view, although its commonest manifestation was in temple prostitution. What these strictures may have to say about the modern situation, however, belongs to the wider task of discovering what the Scriptures mean, and how they are to be applied in the twenty-first century, rather than to the task of discovering simply what they say which is what we are about today.

The passage at 1 Timothy 8:10 contains a very similar condemnation of the *arsenokoitais* to that of 1 Cor 6:9. The context is a list of vices that closely follows the order

⁷ Scroggs, R. *The New Testament and Homosexuality*. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1983) 62-65.

⁸ Wright, D. F. Homosexuals or prostitutes? The meaning of *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10). *Vigiliae Christianae*. 38 (1984): 125-53. See also Coleman, P. *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality*. (SPCK, London. 1980).

of the Ten Commandments, as most commentators have noted. The strictures here are more general, but once again those guilty of male same sex relationships are to be considered as belonging to the same category as those guilty of other socially and morally disruptive actions, such as stealing, killing, lying, and so forth.

2 Homosexual Behaviour in General

The final passage of Scripture that needs examination is found in Paul's Letter to the Romans 1:24-28.⁹ These verses are part of an extended discussion of the results in human behaviour of human sinfulness. The key to the passage is God's creation of men and women in his image, and the consequences of forsaking what that image should mean in the way human beings relate firstly to God, and then to each other. Our argument has thus come full circle, we started with the order of creation as intended, now we come to the order of creation disrupted and damaged. The damning indictment of human behaviour that is presented in these verses is not Paul's personal judgment on his contemporaries, but rather the divine judgment revealed by the gospel on all humanity in all eras – it is a universal accusation, and a universal condemnation that applies to all without exception, irrespective of time and place, for, as Paul writes later, “all have sinned and fall short of God's glory” (Rom 3:23). The indictment of homosexual behaviour in these verses must be seen, therefore, as simply part of the wider indictment of all wrongdoing and vice, such as the actions listed in verses 29-31. Such behaviour comes as the result of forsaking God, and the inevitable consequence is that God hands over control to sinful humanity and its disordered ways (vv 24, 26) – to forsake God is to be forsaken oneself, and God says in effect, “very well, if that is what you want, get on with it, and reap the consequences.”

The argument of the verses dealing with same sex relationships is straightforward, and does not give rise to the sort of exegetical problems that have been encountered earlier. The condemnation of homosexual behaviour forms part of a broad catalogue of the ways in which mankind has turned its back on the divine principles of the good life. People have turned their backs on God in terms of worship, and in terms of moral behaviour; the end result is sin against the truth of God, sin against nature, and sin against others. Female homosexuality is mentioned before male, and it is of interest that this is the only place in the Bible where it is mentioned. It is condemned as being “against nature” (*para phusin*). Paul is using terminology that has a strong Greek background, rather than Jewish, indeed, “nature” is not a Hebrew concept, and only makes its way into Jewish literature in the Hellenistic period (in such documents as *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *4 Maccabees* in the apocryphal books). The list of vices reflects not merely Jewish morality, but especially that of the Stoics which widens the application of Paul's words into a universal condemnation. Although there has been discussion about the exact meaning of the phrase “against nature” it would seem to be a reasonable conclusion that Paul is referring to the created order,

⁹ In the consideration of this section I have been largely guided by the outstanding commentaries of C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (International Critical Commentary)*. Vol 1. (T & T Clark, Edinburgh. 1975) and James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Word Books, Dallas. 1988).

particularly in view of his earlier references to what may be termed “natural revelation” (vv 19, 20), those attributes of God that may be understood rationally from the evidence of the created universe. Paul is thus arguing that homosexual behaviour is contrary to the intention of God in creation, and as much the outcome of human rebellion against God as is idolatry, and all the other consequences that flow from it, such as murder, arrogance, deceit, greed, jealousy, and so forth. To argue, as some do, that Paul is writing simply about homosexuality within a context of debauched behaviour fails to do justice to Paul's essential point that all human beings, without exception, stand under the judgment of God, for as Jesus made clear, to think a wrong action is to do it (Matt 5:27,28).

In Conclusion

This brief discussion of the biblical texts dealing with homosexuality in the Scriptures leads to an inevitable negative conclusion. No Bible text provides a positive picture of same sex relationships, and everywhere that they are mentioned they are condemned, in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. Further, this rejection of homosexual behaviour, especially in the New Testament, is always within a wider context of other forms of moral corruption, and unacceptable behaviour, such as violence, dishonesty, greed, unchastity, and idolatry. The determination of what the biblical text is saying, however, is not the same as determining what it may mean in any given context, and especially in a social context very different from that in which the biblical writings took shape, and to which they referred. What we have been trying to do this afternoon, therefore, is but the first stage of the interpretive task. The much more difficult, but equally essential, task is that of applying Scripture to our modern situation in order to provide an ethic that is not simply derived from our presuppositions, and faith assumptions, but is somehow true to the divine revelation in Scripture. That will be the task of the next seminar.