

## SOME THOUGHTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY IN RELATION TO THE BIBLE

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During the past decade, I have read some of the study documents that the church has presented to their members for study of what the relation of gays and lesbians to their church might be. I have participated in a study group or two. I have done reading that touches on this concern, sometimes coming across enlightenment by accident. At other times I have looked for and read books that promised to offer more organized insights. I studied again and again the Biblical passages that refer to what, since the mid or late 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been known as homosexuality.

What follows is a number of thoughts coming out of those years of reflection. I don't pretend to write a scholarly paper. I think of it as a meditative essay on the Biblical texts containing thoughts based on exegetical and historical insights of various kinds that I have come across through the years. I am greatly indebted to *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* by Daniel A. Helminiak, Ph.D., Alamo Square Press, San Francisco, 1994.

At times the statement is made that there are many, many references in the Bible about homosexuality, and all of those references condemn it as sin of the worst sort, as an abomination. Christians cannot accept or bless sinful behaviour, end of discussion!

As a matter of fact, there are seven passages, none very long or detailed, in the entire Bible that address homosexuality. Four are in the Hebrew Testament and three are in the New Testament. There may be people who claim there are more, possibly including all the references to Sodom and Gomorrah, of which there are quite a few—but these additional texts do not mention homosexuality at all. I'll ask the reader to look at the seven texts in greater detail.

### **Genesis 19: 1-29**

The “mother” of all the texts that seem totally to condemn homosexuality is, I think without doubt, Genesis 19:1-29. It is the account that follows the visit of three angels to Abraham to announce to him and Sarah that they are finally going to have a son. Abraham receives these three angels with great respect and hospitality. After they leave Abraham, two of them go on to Sodom and Gomorrah. When the two angels arrive at the house of Lot, Abraham's nephew, this man receives them with hospitality similar to that shown them by his uncle. He insists that they must stay in his house, though they tell him they plan to spend the night on the streets. After night falls, the men of the city surround the house, demanding that Lot expel his guests from his house into the streets so that “we may know them”, or, as it is now more straightforwardly put in modern translations, “that we may have intercourse with them.” It is clear that they want to rape them. The doom that falls on the city later that night and the next morning, because of their wickedness, is so terrible that it chills the blood to think of it.

To those who believe that homosexuality must be condemned, this story, I suspect, gives feelings of unreasoning terror. They are, I suspect, afraid of what may happen to a country (or a church) if homosexuals may openly state their sexual orientation and live it by entering into a sexual relationship with a same-sex partner. They will not look at options, because always in the foreground is the fear that this will lead to a terrible day of Sodom-and-Gomorrah-like wrath and destruction for us.

It is important to see this story as about sexual acts that are entirely different from a loving relationship between two persons of the same sex. I am convinced that it is, if not even something beyond that, a story about hospitality, or more accurately, a wicked denial of hospitality and the punishment attendant on that denial.

Lot was even prepared to try to distract these men by sending out his two virgin daughters for their use as sexual objects. How would Lot expect men who were lusting for persons of the same sex to be attracted by these two girls, even if they were virgins? To me this says that they were heterosexual men who were going to pervert their actual sexual orientation in order to show these strangers that they thought of them as worse than dirt. Homosexuals usually would not see a sexual relationship with a person of the same sex as demeaning. Heterosexuals, it seems, often do see it that way. So, I would agree with those who say this is a story about perversion. But it seems to me to be heterosexuals willing, for some reason, to go contrary to their true sexual nature by engaging in homosexual acts.

There is also the strong possibility, I think, that the men at the door thought of their demand as a religious act. Lot had lived in the household of Abraham for many years. Wherever Abraham went he built an altar to the Lord God and sacrificed and worshiped him at these altars. When Lot moved to Sodom and Gomorrah, he likely would have built an altar to the Lord God and worshiped him. Cities at that time were not large, perhaps about the size of one of our larger towns. Just about everybody would have known everybody else. The people would have known that Lot worshiped one God, a God who was very different from theirs, and that Lot thought his God was special, greater and more powerful than any of their gods, or even all of them put together. In fact, some years before this, this God, through Abraham, had rescued them from captivity after they had been defeated in a war with some neighbouring kings (Genesis 14).

Now they had seen these two men arriving at Lot's house, and noticed that they were special, even god-like. At their temple, these men could have intercourse with their gods through their human representatives, the prostitute priests and priestesses. Since the men sensed that these visitors were somehow divine, they saw their chance to participate directly in the qualities of these divine beings by having sexual intercourse with real gods.

Far-fetched? Maybe. But it could help us understand why many of the Sodom and Gomorrah passages in the prophets talk about blasphemy and worship of false gods as a reason why God destroyed these cities. (See: Isaiah 1 and 2; Jeremiah 23:11-13; 50:24,29; Ezechiel 16:15-19; Deuteronomy 29,23; 32,27) Genesis 19, This, I am convinced, is either an account of how God acted to judge people because they had broken the rules of hospitality, or, on the other hand, as mentioned above, as a story of how God rejects the magical use of sexual acts in the worship of a god in order to bring about greater fertility in nature or in a wife or in oneself.

God, through the prophets, was engaged in a constant battle with the Israelites and Judahites throughout the times recorded in the Hebrew Testament to motivate them to turn away from the worship of the Baals and Ashteroths, which seems to have included that kind of activity. Often the prostitutes seem even to have been attached to the worship of Jahweh (See: Deut.23:17; 1Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; especially 2 Kings 23:7).

The readers for whom Genesis was written would have known this context, and they would have understood that this was the background of what happened here without it's having been explicitly mentioned. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah thus becomes a horrible example

of how God rejects this kind of worship, as it was offered by the men of Sodom and Gomorrah to those two angels visiting Lot. Jude 7 may even offer us confirmation of this interpretation.

As I have reflected on these two possible interpretations of what Genesis 19:1-29 is intended to say, I have come to realize that the two interpretations I have suggested exclude one another. That is, if the actions of the men of Sodom are seen as having been acts of inhospitality and hostility to strangers in order to humiliate these two men and perhaps kill them, then they would not have been attempting to gain some benefit by having intercourse with them as divine beings. Vice versa, if this story is an account of an attempted sharing in their divinity, the end result might have been what some commentators have called gang rape, but the intention would have been the kind of worship, as, for instance, practiced by the Canaanites, that was an abomination to the Lord God. The story gives very few details. Either interpretation could be possible.

A most interesting aspect of the two stories (Genesis 18 and 19) is that on this occasion God gives Abraham and Sarah the gift of fertility. They do become fertile, and that son, whom God had promised again and again, was actually born to them during the following year. God finally gives them the fulfillment of his promise through this gift of fertility, and it is clearly a gift. In contrast, if this story is about intercourse with divine beings, God utterly destroys the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who tried to achieve greater fertility by having sexual intercourse with the angels of the Lord God. This seems to me to give additional weight to the possibility that these two stories contrast true worship and a kind of worship that God will not accept.

### **Judges 19:16-27**

The circumstances in Judges 19:16-27 are somewhat different, but the message is much the same. Here a Levite and his concubine on the way back to their home in Ephraim were staying overnight in Gibeah in the area of the tribe of Benjamin. They had been invited by an old man to stay with him after they had been refused by others.

During the evening some in the town surrounded the house, calling upon the host to send out his guest so they might have intercourse with him, possibly because he was a Levite, a holy man serving the Lord God. In the end, the Levite thrust his concubine out the door for them to do with as they liked. This story, I think, may also be interpreted as about the consequences of inhospitality or, possibly, since the Levite is a holy man, about an attempt to share in his holiness through sexual intercourse. If so, the Benjaminites would have been acting according to what the Hebrew Testament indicates in various places as being Canaanite worship practice. The Hebrew Testament tells us that Israelites again and again adopted Canaanite religious practices. They may have been satisfied to have the Levite's concubine, because she was connected with the holy man, while the daughter of the host had no connection with the sacred and so was spared.

It must be very clear that neither of these events has any similarity with a loving relationship, including a sexual relationship, between persons of the same sex.

In looking at the three passages in the New Testament that refer to homosexuality, let me begin with those in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy.

### **1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10**

Two Greek words which appear in these texts need discussion and clarification. *Malakoi*, which appears only in 1 Corinthians, basically has the meaning of "soft". When Jesus talks about John the Baptist and asks the people around him, who it was they went to see, he says among other things, "You did not go out to see someone in soft clothes", and the Greek word *malakois* is the

word used to describe such clothes. So in this verse *malakoi* refers to persons who are in some way “soft”.

As the word is translated as “undisciplined” or “weak” in some non-biblical texts and also applied to heterosexuals who were wanton or loose, Paul may be condemning all moral looseness: lewd, lustful and lascivious behaviour of all kinds, heterosexual as well as homosexual.<sup>1</sup>

*Arsenokoitai* appears so rarely that its use here cannot be compared to usage in longer passages elsewhere that would help us understand it more fully.<sup>2</sup> Greek had many terms for the various aspects of male homogenital behaviour. But Hebrew had none. So, Greek-speaking Jews may have created the term to refer to male-male intercourse, a way of saying in Greek the prohibition in the “Holiness Code” against a man lying with a man as with a woman. Paul was repeating the prohibition that appears in Leviticus, which, we recall, is about Jews’ defining themselves from non-Jewish cultures and not about condemnation of what is forbidden on the basis of ethics or morality.<sup>3</sup>

But what did Paul intend to condemn with this word *arsenokoitai*? Since Paul was writing to the Christians in Corinth, among whom there were both Jews, Greeks, and probably persons (at least among the slaves) from various parts of the world, he was writing to people living in a city known throughout the Roman Empire for its depravity. There is a hint in 1 Timothy 10 of what specifically Paul may have been writing against. There, immediately after the word “sodomites”, we have the term “slave traders”, which may indicate slave traders who sold slaves into prostitution, including men or boys for male-male prostitution.<sup>4</sup>

### **Romans 1:18 – 2:16**

One of the things that has often puzzled me about Romans, especially the first few chapters, is the question, “Whom is Paul writing to?” At times he seems to be speaking to Greeks or Romans and at other times to Jews. Of course, he does say in 2:9, 10 that what he is writing applies “to the Jew first and also the Greek”. But I think it is important to differentiate between which passage Paul is writing to which group.

When Paul wrote to the Romans, he had quite a task to fulfill. He wanted to visit the Christian community in Rome, which had both Gentile and Jewish members. There was a lot of controversy on various issues as to whether Christians could eat food that was “unclean” according to the “Holiness Code”, whether, if they were Gentiles, they needed to be circumcised, as the “Holiness Code” required, etc. There was bitterness connected with these controversies and the danger of splits in the community.

It is quite possible that we see here how shrewdly Paul handles the situation. He starts his letter by addressing the Jewish Christians, playing on their sense of superiority. He wants to get them on his side. So he takes his first step by describing an aspect of the Gentile lifestyle that he knows the Jewish leaders would disapprove of. He puts the Gentiles down by highlighting their homo-genital practices.

We don’t have far to read before we see Paul turning on the Jewish Christians. He’s very cautious in his approach. He doesn’t say that he is now addressing the Jewish Christians on their failings but when we get to verse 17 it is clear that the Jewish Christians are meant. Paul denies them the right to be self-righteous about not engaging in things they consider dirty when they steal, commit adultery and rob temples.

Then, with great clarity Paul makes his point: In the face of faith in Christ and Christ's call for purity of heart, ritual purity does not matter. "A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal" (Romans 2:28). In 11:13 Paul rebukes the Gentiles for thinking themselves better than the Jewish Christians, who are, after all, the first to be God's chosen people.

So Paul writes these first chapters of Romans as he does in the hope of gaining the undivided attention of both groups in the Christian community by appealing to their differing concerns and prejudices in order to keep them in harmony with one another. He wants each group to know that salvation comes to everyone who has faith, "To the Jew first and also the Greek" (Romans 1:16), which is, as we know, his message in everything he wrote in his gospel: grace and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:7). "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:3,4).<sup>5</sup>

It is ironic that the words Paul wrote in order to try to keep the Christians in Rome together are being used in our day in a way that is in danger of dividing us from one another.<sup>6</sup>

### **Jude 7**

Jude in this verse accuses the people of Sodom of having gone lusting after "strange" or "alien" flesh. Though the latest version of the RSV translates this: "indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust" the Greek text actually reads *sarkos heteras*, which quite literally translates into "strange/alien flesh".

The context (verse 6) shows us that what is meant is humans having intercourse with angels. Genesis 6:1-4 records a very obscure story: "the sons of God saw the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose." Verse 7 is, I think, an obverse parallel to this: the men of Sodom and Gomorrah wanting to take angels for sexual intercourse, for the reason that the "men" who came to stay with Lot were angels sent from God. So the strangeness does not refer to same-sex relations but a desire for sex of humans with angels.<sup>7</sup>

### **2 Peter 2:6**

This passage is sometimes seen as condemning homogenital activity, because Sodom is mentioned. As the text does not say what the ungodliness mentioned here is, hardly any student of scripture would hold that opinion today. The text declares that God punishes the wicked. Sodom is simply listed as an example.

### **Conclusion**

When we look at these seven biblical passages, there seems little connection with same-sex relationships that are based on loving and caring for one another. What is being condemned is inhumanity: neglect of the poor, neglect and exploitation of the powerless or weak, arrogance, using sex as a means of controlling another, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, using sex as a way of humiliating another, impersonal sex, sex as idolatry, etc. None of these texts addresses the issue of the loving same-sex relationships of Christian gay and lesbian persons, or any of the other questions about sexual ethics being discussed today.

Of course, there is guidance and inspiration in the Bible for persons living in a same-sex relationship. There is much said there about the attitudes which God calls upon Christian people to have towards each other. All of these words of inspiration and guidance, the commandment of

love, the core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, are surely the things that Christian same-sex couples will see as valid for them and, in fact, binding upon them. In short, aside from their sexual orientation, there can be no difference between the manner of life that a Christian gay or lesbian would follow in order to be a committed child of God and that followed by heterosexual persons.<sup>8</sup>

In working through our attitudes in this matter, our churches are confronted with a very serious challenge. May God through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and giver of life, open our hearts to each other and guide us in his grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel A. Helminiak, Ph.D.: *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, Alamo Square Press, San Francisco, Third Printing, 1995, pp. 88,89

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 89

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 91

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 93

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.p. 79 - 81

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 83

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.p. 97- 99

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 108

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