

AN INTRODUCTION TO

THE CLOBBER PASSAGES

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE BY STEVEN ANDERSON

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FOREWORD

The Bible, for many, is a book that informs our understanding of the divine, our history, and the principles with which we uphold societal practices and our common morality. The wisdom in its pages ranges from poems, stories, and songs to laws and parables. Passed down over thousands of years it was first an oral history and later a compilation of sacred writings. It has been translated into many languages and moreover it is humanity's link to understanding our relationship with the divine. Throughout our long history of deep reverence for the Bible, our understanding of its texts has evolved. As cultures have changed through globalization the original context and meaning behind scriptures have

sometimes been obscured or even lost to time leaving them open to new interpretations and enforcement.

The Bible has a lot to say about people and bodies, what a person can wear or eat, how a person should act, show respect, and even the conduct of loans, taxes, and sex. Concerning sexuality, the Bible has multiple understandings of sex that have changed over time. However when it comes to non-heteronormative, patriarchal views of sexuality the modern church has been exclusionary and refused to reinterpret its views on homosexuality.¹ Condemnation comes at a high cost for some Christians who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) who are barred from experiencing the fullness of the community of Christ due to exclusionary biblical stances on sexuality.

Below I look at several well-known biblical passages generally referred to as "Clobber Texts" which the church uses to denote non-heteronormative sexualities and exclude LGBTQ+ people from the Christian community. I believe that modern fundamentalist understanding of these passages is historically flawed due to poor translation and lack of cultural context with regards to scripture. By looking at modern exegesis of biblical passages that take various critical factors into account it becomes clear that our understanding of scripture must change from exclusionary practices based on sexuality to be more welcoming of those willing to share our faith.

[These notations are brief and can be expounded upon by examining the source materials independently.]

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GENESIS 19:1-13 KJV

1 And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground; 2 And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways. And they said, Nay; but we will abide in the street all night. 3 And he pressed upon them greatly; and they turned in unto him, and entered into his house; and he made them a feast, and did bake unleavened bread, and they did eat. 4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter: 5 And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them. 6 And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him, 7 And said, I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. 8 Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof. 9 And they said, Stand back. And they said again, This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man, even Lot, and came near to break the door. 10 But the men put forth their hand, and pulled Lot into the house to them, and shut to the door. 11 And they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness, both small and great: so that they wearied themselves to find the door. 12 And the men said unto Lot, Hast thou here any besides? son in law, and thy sons, and thy daughters, and whatsoever thou hast in the city, bring them out of this place: 13 For we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it.²

When people look at the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah they generally point to the cause of the cities' destruction being due to the inhabitant's sin of rampant sexual immorality. Not only that, but scripture also seems to reinforce this viewpoint by noting the translation of "yadha" or "to know" as sexually explicit and draws a line to the attempted gang rape of angels, however when we inspect the scripture we see that the true sins of Sodom.³

In Ezekiel 16: 48-49 it is noted; "Behold,

this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."⁴ As we can see, sexual immorality was not initially considered as one of the many sins the people of Sodom had committed to be deserving of the destruction of the city. Their primary sins were pride, inhospitality, and disregard for others.⁵ This was the long-standing interpretation of the sins of Sodom until much later in the second, third and fourth centuries AD when early Christian theologians conflated the excesses of Sodom seen in Ezekiel as to also include "excess pleasures of the flesh" and later link same-sex behavior as being related to sex-in-excess.⁶

As for the attempted rape of the angels in Genesis 19, it is worth noting that while same-sex sexual behavior is implied, the focus of the behavior is violent domination, not what we would consider of same-sex orientation today.⁷ The attempted rape, therefore, is a reinforcement of our understanding of the haughty behavior of the people of Sodom. At the time, same-sex behavior and especially rape was seen as an act of power over others or, humiliation, not an expression of mutual love and eroticism (more on domination and active/passive sexuality under the section on 1 Corinthians).⁸

LEVITICUS 18:22 KJV

22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.⁹

These passages seem relatively straightforward without investigation, but by carefully looking at the context of these singular passages from scripture we can understand that they are misleading. These passages from Leviticus are a part of what the Hebrews set down as the "Holiness Code". A series of guidelines and cultural laws set up to establish behavioral practices to distinguish the Hebrew's identity as separate from the other peoples (who worshiped other gods) living in the near-east at the time.¹⁰ In this regard, heterosexual prostitution, sex between men, bestiality and virgin sacrifice (as well as many other aspects of life including food and how a person should dress) were seen ritually in other cultures' pagan religious practices and therefore were forbidden as acts of idolatry (Idolatry being outlawed in Exodus 20 1:17).

In this passage, the word "Abomination" is typically used to denote same-sex sexual behavior. "Abomination" is often seen in the negative light of its English definition which includes synonyms like "abhorred" and "vile, shameful, or detestable-action" it can be easy to lose focus on the original Hebrew context.¹¹ Generally, the term "toevah" translated throughout the bible as "abominable" refers to the similar idolatrous practices mentioned earlier or is used to mark cultural boundary lines such as not eating food with enemies or not charging interest on loans. With this

understanding, "toevah" roughly equates to our modern-day understanding of "taboo" with much less severe connotations than those of capital crimes.¹²

As for the proscribed death penalty in Leviticus 20:13, it is worth noting here that the ideal for Hebrew society was the continuation of their covenant with the Divine.¹³ Any actions that would jeopardize their good favor with God and their promised blessings as a prosperous people were dealt with harshly. As such sexual behavior such as non-procreative sex acts (including same-sex intercourse) were also forbidden as matters of sexual utility and stoic intervention.¹⁴ That being said, various stances on non-procreative sex have been advanced and retracted by theologians for centuries including by the church's highest authorities.¹⁵ The root of legislation over non-procreative sex stems from early theologian's interpretation of the story of Onan in Genesis 38 who defied God's mandate to father a child for his brother's widow through *coitus interruptus*.¹⁶ Some interpretations have led to the vilification of masturbation as well, but it is clearly noted in scripture that it was Onan's refusal to fulfill the covenant, not the act of non-procreative sex in and of itself.¹⁷

ROMANS 1:26-27 KJV

26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: 27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.¹⁸

In Romans, Paul argues that by refusing the wisdom of the Gospel and by choosing to worship idols instead of the true God that people are being punished by being made to give into sexual uses for their bodies that are considered "natural" and "unnatural" however this is a potential misconception based on causality.¹⁹ Paul, on his travels through Rome, has likely witnessed displays of commonplace ritual sex as a form of worship to pagan gods [idolatry], including heterosexual and homosexual prostitution. He assumes that the two are linked as a form of judgment rather than linked by way of practice.²⁰

When it comes to the argument of "natural" vs "unnatural" acts there has been much written as to the exact definition of "nature" we might use to understand this argument. Scholars have laid out multiple histories regarding the interpretation of the "naturalness" of sex including the arguments related to the purpose of sex between a male and female to produce offspring, our evolving perception of what "ideal nature" looks like and how theories regarding ideal nature became popularized.²¹ While some arguments as to the natural intent of human sexuality only look at the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 and "apparent" biological complementarity or try to

unravel the mystery of God's intent for sex via creation, the truth the regarding the naturalness of homosexuality remains ambiguous and is a weak point considering the philosophical impossibility of defining "nature".²²

Aside from "nature", Paul's explanation of God giving men and women up to homosexual behavior is also meant as a taunt or debasement of another type of behavior that was also seen in Sodom, excess. Mathew Vines argues the behavior is not necessarily homosexuality but is in fact lust or an excess of passion just as is mentioned in Ezekiel.²³ While popular culture may still frown upon the ideas of lust and excess, the question of sexuality at the heart of this argument, whether sex acts are natural (morally good) or unnatural (morally sinful) is invalidated when we again look back and note that any practice such as eating or drinking which could be morally ambiguous could be seen negatively or "sinful" if done to excess.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10 NIV

9 Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men[a] 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.²⁴

1 TIMOTHY 1:8-11 NIV

8 We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. 9 We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine 11 that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.²⁵

Arguments against homosexuality that Paul uses in these two passages of scripture focus on the direct translation of two Greek words into English and their subsequent contextual meanings. "Malakoi" meaning literally "soft" in greek was a common term in reference to things like clothing became morally charged to denote things like laziness, weakness, or male effeminacy.²⁶ While these terms related to "softness" are not inherently sexual they represent an intensely patriarchal cultural understanding of masculinity. To be soft was an insult.

While same-sex behavior was somewhat commonplace and even expected in the ancient world there was a deep cultural understanding of strict gender roles.²⁷ Women were expected to be submissive or "passive" in all areas of life, including sexually while men were expected to take the dominant "active" roles. Since women were seen as inferior to men in the class system of the patriarchal-hierarchical near east, to be a man who participated in same-sex behavior as the

"passive" partner was therefore deemed effeminate and dishonorable. Throughout much of history, masculinity has been associated with honor and respect (machoness) so to associate in actions seen as feminine, whether they were sexual in nature or not, was a taboo.

In regards to understanding "malakois" in a sexual context, we are most likely to associate the term to younger male temple prostitutes who would likely take the passive role in pagan ritual sex. In this case, Paul is not necessarily denouncing homosexuality or sexual orientation he is condemning sexual practices that clearly fall into the realm of idol worship and excessive behavior.^{28, 29}

When it comes to the term "Arsenokoitai" in religious texts being translated as "homosexuals" it is generally taken from a similar context. "Arsen" meaning "male" and "koitai" meaning "bed" implies male same-sex behavior.³⁰ While it is sometimes translated as "men who have sex with men" or "homosexuals" it would be more accurate to translate the term in reference to male prostitution, rape, or sexual coercion.³¹ Contextually since the terms appear in what biblical scholars term as "vice lists" alongside other actions that imply coercion such as enslavers, perjurers, and swindlers, our translation of arsenokoitai is likely to be understood as such, condemning those who take advantage of others, not exclusively men who have sex with men.³²

ANCIENT AND MODERN UNDERSTANDINGS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

While these translations and contextual clues help us to note the potential of the original writer's intent it is also worth noting a few things that differentiate modern and biblical understandings of sexuality. The above translations are not fixed and inarguable. Like with all aspects of biblical study, scripture continues to be open to interpretation, however just like in any other aspect of study, an effort to be well informed in all aspects of a subject is key to the creation of strong understanding.³³ Likewise, the study of scripture including the original translation and context is a unique opportunity for insight in determining the limits of personal faith as well as the social ramifications of the enforcement of particular beliefs.³⁴

During the times when the Old Testament and the New Testament were written, people did not have the same understanding of sexual orientation that we have today. While it was assumed that "natural" sexuality was based on the complementarity of creation and it was evidenced that same-sex sexual behavior was possible (and prevalent) there was no understanding of sexual orientation or preference.

Modern understanding of sexual orientation as an innate preference only begins in the 18th century.^{35, 36} Alongside this, "love," "romance" and "sexual attraction" as important parts of modern marriage only became popularized in the 18th century.³⁷ Throughout history

marriage and the exercise of sexuality were not mutually exclusive, and the focus of sexuality has been primarily political.^{38, 39} As such we can easily differentiate modern understandings of homosexuality, which are based on innate love and attraction, from the biblical writer's understanding of utilitarian sexuality. While gender does have an implied role via sexual complementarity the main cultural viewpoint was based primarily on views regarding the power dynamic of dominant and submissive.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

As you can see, searching for a biblically grounded understanding of sexuality is more complicated than quoting scripture. Subsequently, it is important to view scripture holistically before making a hard stance regarding any initial claims one might make when picking up your favorite translation. The translation of countless sources texts from ancient forms of Hebrew, Greek, and other languages to create unified and accurate works is a matter of interpretation that sometimes is misleading, and other times are outright false. I hope that this work has encouraged the rethinking old stances on LGBTQ+ sexualities, allowing for broader community and inclusion. If you are intrigued or empowered by this introduction to the topic I implore the reader to seek out the source texts used here which go into much greater detail regarding the nuance of translation and social context.



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