

Same-Sex Intimacy and the Old Testament

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Biblical citations from the NRSV, CEV

...for those who struggle
and those who love them...

Introduction:

After Abilene Christian announced new faculty and student guidelines during the spring semester of 2018 and asserted that its policies were based on the “clear teaching of Scripture,” I began to write about the texts in my field of study (O.T.) that are typically used to denounce same-sex intimacy. I expected to write three, maybe four blog posts to demonstrate that these texts are 1) not so easy to understand and 2) sometimes not even about same-sex intimacy. To be honest, I wasn’t sure what I would find or what I would conclude. I knew about the texts, but I had never taken the time to study these passages in their literary and cultural contexts. So I began, realizing that my time for research would be severely limited, but I could at least find and share basic information and the questions this information raises.

At first, my original plan for three or four essays grew to five blog posts covering the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19) and the ban against cross-dressing (Deut. 22:5). In my mind, this was the end, so I wrote about the importance of wisdom in our theological conversations and decisions and signed-off. I knew there were two more texts in the O.T. that relate to the topic of same-sex intimacy (Lev. 18:22, 20:13), but I had no intention of writing about these texts. I was afraid that I would bore the reader to the point of tears if I wrote four posts about the complicated cultural issues surrounding these passages and their literary setting in the book of Leviticus. Within two or three days, however, it was clear that those who had been reading the earlier posts were not going to let me off the hook so easily. So, I continued my research and wrote essays that any normal audience would have never looked at, much less read. I discovered that many of us are not just curious about this topic and the biblical text, we are starving for reliable information that will help us understand these passages, identify the questions they raise, the answers they provide (and don’t provide), and the issues that remain ambiguous. Even more, I found that we are looking for a place that not only provides such information but also creates a safe space to think and reflect. With your help, this became my objective as the weeks passed and I posted one essay after another.

The essays are presented here as they appeared in my blog “Seasons” (<http://char.is/glennpemberton/>). Only technical errors have been corrected.

-Glenn
June 5, 2018

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1

The Sin of Sodom? or America?

Originally Posted on March 10, 2018

Warning: this is may not be about what you think.

In ancient Israel, to call a place Sodom was a major insult. I want to know why? So, as best we can let's clear the deck of our assumptions and trace what this place/theme means in the Old Testament. We may quickly set aside 19 of the 39 O.T. texts that mention Sodom because they do not provide any clues about Sodom's great sin: references to the location or king of Sodom (Gen. 10:19; 13:10, 12), the story about Abraham rescuing Lot (Gen. 14:2, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 21, 22), and comparative statements in which Sodom simply represents the epitome of God's judgment (Deut. 29:23; Isa. 1:9, 13:9; Jer. 19:18; 50:40; Lam. 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9). Twenty references to Sodom remain (and occur in seven texts):

1. Genesis 13:13 tells us that the "people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord" (NRSV), but does not identify their great sin.
2. Deuteronomy 32:32 reads: "Their vine comes from the vinestock of Sodom, from the vineyards of Gomorrah." Here, the reference is to the foreign nation that will conquer Judah, a foolish nation who has a different "rock" (32:32b), and whose fruit (that Judah will eat) is poisonous and bitter (like the bite of an asp, 32:33). Again, nothing in the text helps us understand what is so terrible about Sodom.

3. Isaiah provides our first clues. Soon after the book begins, the prophet addresses the people: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom!” (1:10a). As we continue to read this address we find that God has had enough of their sacrifices (1:11), is sick of their holy days (1:12-14), and won’t listen to their prayers any longer because they have hands “full of blood” (1:15). They need to wash and become clean, to remove their evil from before God (1:16). Specifically, Isaiah calls on them to “do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:17). In this text, these practices appear to be the reason the prophet calls Israel’s leaders “rulers of Sodom” (1:10a).
4. A little later in the book of Isaiah, the prophet claims, “The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom they do not hide it” (Isa. 3:9a). As a result, Isaiah declares that: “what their hands have done shall be done to them” (3:11b). In other words, what will happen to them is roughly the same as what they have been doing to others. Isaiah then explains: children will oppress them and women will rule over them. (3:12). Or, if we look earlier in the chapter, boys will be their princes and babies will rule over them (3:4). Verse five summarizes the point: everyone will be oppressed (3:5). These few clues align with Isaiah’s earlier statement. The powerful (Sodom) have had a field day oppressing those on the outskirts of society who lack access to power. But now, the prophet warns, there will be a great reversal and the weak will oppress the strong.
5. In Jeremiah 23 the Lord calls attention to the prophets and priests who are ungodly and wicked (23:11). The prophets follow Baal and lead the people astray (23:14a). But even more shocking, these leaders “commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers”—all of them “have become like Sodom to me” (23:14b). They support those who do what is wrong, and to reach back for an earlier sentence: “Their course has been evil, and their might is not right” (23:10b). To be “like Sodom” suggests a misuse of might or power (against the powerless).
6. Ezekiel 16 offers six additional references to Sodom within two paragraphs. (16:43b-56). Here, Jerusalem and the nation of Judah are personified as a woman who’s older sister was North Israel and who’s younger sister was Sodom (16:46). Ezekiel claims that Jerusalem/Judah is much worse than Sodom and her sisters (16:48). In time, the Lord promises to restore the fortunes of Sodom, North Israel,

and Jerusalem (16:53). They will all return to their former states (16:55), before the time that Jerusalem in her pride used her sister's name, Sodom, as a byword or insult (16:56). In the middle of all these references to Sodom, Ezekiel speaks in detail: "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. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it" (16:49-50). What Isaiah and Jeremiah have suggested Ezekiel specifies. When the prophets heard or read the story of Sodom, they saw beyond what we typically see or hear. Instead of a narrow issue (homosexuality), the prophets saw a larger, more systemic problem: great wealth and prosperity, pride, and little concern for the outsider or "other" person in need. Instead of helping or taking care of the most vulnerable in their society (e.g., women, children, or travelers in need of hospitality), they took advantage of and used them for their own selfish purposes. This activity caused the prophets think of Sodom.

7. Finally, our study leads us to reconsider Genesis 18-19. The perspective of the prophets leads us in a different direction than we might typically go. To begin, we can now understand who was crying out to the Lord and why (Gen 18:20). It's the poor, the widow, the orphans or children, and immigrant. It's those who have faced down the many forms of oppression the powerful residents of Sodom have inflicted on the weak and vulnerable. We can also understand Lot's actions a little better. He knew the nature of the city and the danger both "men" (angels) faced if they stayed in the square (19:1-3). Lot's extension of hospitality is a counter-cultural act. He tried to protect those who had no power or legal standing in his community from being raped and most likely killed (see Judg. 19), even if it meant sacrificing his two daughters (19:3b-8; a feature of the story that still turns my stomach).

Now for a reflection or two (or three).

1. It is undeniable that the threat in Genesis 19 is homosexual rape (and most likely death). However, Genesis 19 does not in itself condemn homosexuality—nor do the prophets who use "Sodom" in their oracles. Instead, the "outcry" of Sodom is the result of a wealthy, prosperous class of citizens who abusing those who are vulnerable: women, children, the poor, the resident alien, or traveler.

2. It's not as easy to preach about Sodom through the eyes of the prophets because we no longer get to talk about "those people" and their terrible sin. None of the secondary texts that mention Sodom have anything to say about homosexuality; it's simply not in the texts. Yes, the form of the attempted rape in Genesis 19 was homosexual. However, based on what the prophets see, the issue isn't sexual or gender identity but the violent oppression of the vulnerable.
3. If anyone in this world has wealth, excess of food, and prosperous ease (not to mention pride), it's us: you and me. Like it or not, no one on earth has more wealth, more food, more time on our hands, or pride. So like it or not, if the Lord or prophets are going to call anyone Sodom today, we are the most likely candidates. Not because we are gay or lesbian or support various gender identifications, but because of the way we treat others, especially others who "don't belong" in some way: the poor, the vulnerable, the immigrant, or migrant.

I'm well past my word limit, so I leave further reflection to you. To be honest, I knew about Ezekiel's statement before we started, but only in preparation did I come to see the consistency of the prophets. I don't care to be called "Sodom," but I must confess that I fit the prophets' definition far better than I would like.

2

RuPaul and the Clarity of Scripture

Originally Posted on March 19, 2018

I'm confused. *Let my children and former students echo a mighty "Amen."* I'm confused these days by statements that speak of "clear Biblical teaching" about same-sex attraction (and related LGBTQ issues). To speak of my field of study (Old Testament), I find that the text is simply not as straightforward as it might first appear. Previously, in the post "[The Sin of Sodom? or America?](#)" I attempted to demonstrate this lack of simplicity by examining Genesis 19 (the episode at Sodom) through the eyes of ancient Israel via other O.T. texts. The result was both startling and convicting. According to the prophets, the problem at Sodom was a failure to seek justice and defend the poor and needy. Instead of helping, they oppressed those without access to power: "Might makes right" for those living in Sodom. Or, to put a clearer lens on the issue: Sodom "*had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy*" (Jer. 16:49). What we may see when we read the text is not how Israel read the text: what we may identify as *the obvious issue*, they don't appear to notice.^[1]

Deuteronomy provides a second example that contributes to my confusion. The text reads:

*A woman must not wear men's clothing,
nor a man wear women's clothing,*

for the Lord your God detests

anyone who does this. (22:5 NIV)

If we know his name, this verse might make us think of RuPaul dressed in fish-net stockings, short skirt, low-cut blouse with maybe a hint of cleavage and ample breasts, high heels, lip stick, eye-shadow, dangling ear rings, and a wig. In other words, a man dressed in women's clothing. If not Rue Paul, we might think of Dustin Hoffman as *Tootsie* (1982), or Robin Williams as *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). Or we might turn to movies such as *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995, with Patrick Swayze as "Vida," Wesley Snipes as "Noxeema," and John Leguizamo as "Chi-Chi") and *The Birdcage* (1996, with Nathan Lane as "Starina"). Or turning the clock back further, numerous productions have featured men in women's clothing: from ancient Greek and Shakespearian theatre in which men played all the male and female roles, Ricky and Fred in an episode or two of *I Love Lucy*, the musical *South Pacific*, and the popular Texas play *The Greater Tuna*. On stage, most appear to rescind or lift the "clear teaching" of Deuteronomy 22 (though not everyone agrees). Off stage, is the text still really all that simple? After all, no men (or women) looked like Rue Paul in ancient Israel. And awareness of even the recent history of interpretation suggests things might be a little more complicated than they first appear. After all, *who wears the pants in your family?* I remember when this verse was part of a hot discussion about women wearing pants to church in the 1970's. Then, the practice found acceptance as long as women wore "pant suits" (isn't that odd?) or anything but blue jeans (which women wore elsewhere). And speaking of elsewhere, we can be sure that Deuteronomy was part of the discussion back when women began to wear pants elsewhere (except church). In less than one hundred years, little by little our understanding of the text has changed. So, I wonder if it's possible for us hear what those originally reading or hearing this text heard? Would this clear my confusion? If so, naturally we must begin with a closer look at the text itself. The NIV (above) as well as CEB, NLT, NASB, and the Message translate the first two lines as identical parallel statements: a woman must not wear men's clothing and a man must not wear women's clothing. The underlying Hebrew, however, is not the same in each line. First, while the general term for a woman (*ishah*) appears in both lines, the opposite term for a man or male (*ish*; cf. Gen. 2:23) does not appear. Instead, we find the term *geber* which generally denotes strength, thus: a *strong man*, *powerful man*, *grown man*, a *real man* (as we might say it), or often a *warrior* (Judg. 5:30).

Second, the term for “clothing” also differs. While the second line forbids the man from wearing women’s *simlat* (literally, *clothing*), the first line forbids the woman from wearing men’s *keli* (literally, *gear, baggage, equipment for war, implement for hunting, weapons, or stuff*).^[2] For these reasons, some English versions translate the first line as “a man’s apparel” (NRSV, NJPS) or “that which pertaineth to a man” (KJV, ASV).

Given these differences in the Hebrew, it seems a bit misleading to translate the phrases identically, especially in our culture when we are apt to get the wrong idea. Even worse is the translation of the CEV: “Women must not pretend to be men, and men must not pretend to be women.” If the writer had wanted to say this, he could have done so, just as the writer could have used identical parallel phrases, but didn’t.

My questions about the text are easy to ask but difficult to answer: What’s the meaning of the first line with its special vocabulary for men and their stuff? And what’s the idea of the second line with its typical words for women and their clothing? Why the difference between the two lines and what is the significance of this difference? I’d love to stop and answer these questions, if I knew the answers. But I don’t, at least not yet. Before we race ahead of ourselves with quick answers, we need to put more information on the table, a lot more information. So despite the problem with “to be continued” blog posts, if we’re to understand Deuteronomy 22:5 we must continue a little later—and fair warning: I can’t promise that we’re going arrive at “clear Biblical teaching.” Maybe we will, maybe we won’t; I may be fated to live by faith with a little (or a lot of) confusion.

Notes:

^[1]I deliberately bracket out the N.T. (and later writers) so that we can hear the text as ancient Israel originally heard and understood it. How N.T. writers interpreted and used the O.T. another set of issues, perhaps for another day.

^[2]Hebrew dictionaries that include the meaning “clothing” for *keli* refer to Deut. 22:5 for support.

3

What Not to Wear: Deuteronomy and the Clarity of Scripture

Originally Posted on March 22, 2018

For the record: *I'm still confused*. Our prior work ([RuPaul and the Clarity of Scripture](#)) prepared me to translate our text:

A woman must not wear the things of mighty men,
nor a man dress in women's garments;
for whoever does is abhorrent to the Lord your God. (Deut. 22:5)

I admit that it's easier to read a text and quickly assume we know it's "clear teaching"; after all, *the text says what it means and means what it says*, right?? It's more difficult to ask probing questions. What is the surrounding text about? What is an "abhorrent" thing? What did ancient Israelites wear? And what does any of this have to do with us? It's time to put more information on the table and watch how it clears everything up. (*I'm laughing so hard I almost fell out of my chair typing that sentence.*)

Let's begin with literary context. Deuteronomy consists of speeches from Moses to the Israelites as they are poised to enter the Promised Land. The second speech (5:1-29:1; in

which we find our text) addresses diverse topics, from establishing leadership positions in the new nation to the problem of a rebellious son/child, and almost everything in-between. I draw our attention to two features.

First, the term translated “abhorrent” or “detestable” in our text appears ten other times in this second speech. Most things that are abhorrent have to do with the worship of other gods (12:31; 13:14; 17:4; 18:9, 12; 20:18; the fees of prostitutes may also refer to the practice of sacred prostitution as/in worship, 23:18). Other research also suggests a link between cross-dressing and the worship of Ishtar and other gods and goddesses of Israel’s era. Otherwise, objects or practices that are abhorrent include inappropriate sacrifice (17:1), improper remarriage (24:4),^[1] and honest business practices (25:16).

Second, thirteen texts/topics surround our text:

1. Marrying a female prisoner of war (21:10-14)
2. Honoring the right of the firstborn (21:15-17)
3. Stoning a stubborn and rebellious son/child (21:18-21)
4. Regulation of capital punishment “on a tree” (21:22-23)
5. Returning a stray animal or lost property (22:1-3)
6. Assisting a fallen donkey on the side of the road (22:4)
7. *Our Text* (22:5)
8. Removing eggs from a nest, but not taking the mother (22:6-7)
9. A safety regulation for new houses (22:8)
10. Not sowing two types of seed in one field (22:9)
11. Not plowing with an ox and a donkey (22:10)
12. Not wearing clothing of wool and linen (22:11)
13. Wearing tassels on the four corners of a cloak (22:12)

As a matter of practice, we have responded to these laws in various ways. In some cases, we’ve endorsed the action or principle (#5, #6, #8, #9), in other cases we’ve rejected the idea (#1, #3), and most of the time we ignore these instructions because they are unique to Israel and don’t fit our culture (#2, #4, #10, #11, #12, #13).

So, how does the context of 22:5 help clear my confusion? On the one hand, we may suspect that our text also refers to a practice peculiar to ancient Israel’s culture; a custom that has no more to do with us than the ban on wearing clothing made from two types of material.

Maybe. On the other hand, based on the typical use of the term “abhorrent” in this speech, we may suspect that 22:5 has something to do with the worship of other gods. Maybe. Let’s move along to clothing. What did men and women wear in ancient Israel, and what was the difference?[2] Men’s clothing included an inner-garment (*ketonet*) wrapped around the waist reaching mid-calf or the ankles (like a kilt) with a leather belt from which a man could hang a knife or other tools and valuables. With or without this “kilt” men also wore a “tunic”—one piece of cloth draped over a shoulder or two pieces sewn together with a hole for the head and sleeves, both types reaching below the knees. A man’s outer-garment consisted of a cloak or mantle—a square garment of cloth or animal skin draped around the body, over one shoulder, and belted at the waist. This cloak was the most essential garment, used to carry things and sleep in. Thus, it was forbidden to keep the cloak of a poor person (Exod. 22:25-26). Decorated cloaks with sleeves denoted special status or wealth. Finally, men wore leather sandals, with later evidence of some footwear that covered the entire foot. To go barefoot indicated poverty, mourning, or standing on holy ground.

Information about women’s clothing is sparse. As a preface: women and men worked hard in agriculture with separate responsibilities for food preparation, hunting, and other tasks. So it’s no surprise that their clothing was similar. Women wore an undergarment similar to males, a long *ketonet* (kilt) or a long tunic/robe with sleeves. As for an outer garment, women also wore a cloak—a square piece of material wrapped around their body, covering one shoulder. A versatile garment, it could be pulled over the head as a hood or pulled up to cover the face. Wealthy women might wear robes with sleeves and/or a decorated cloak. Women wore veils only on special occasions to denote their status or character. And typical women’s footwear differed little if any from men’s, though wealthy women might have more elaborate or decorated footwear.[3]

So where does all this new data leave me? Honestly, *I’m even more confused by a text that’s not nearly as clear as it first appears {that others regard to be clear}*. The text may have to do with the worship of other gods or some other cultural practice that we do not share. And while I have no doubt that there was some difference between men and women’s clothing in Israel, I can’t specify this difference.[4] Meanwhile, I still recall that 22:5 says women shouldn’t wear “the things (*keli*) of mighty men”—without using any of the typical words for clothing. So where do we go from here? We take up one more perspective, another way

of thinking about the subject—perhaps even the most important viewpoint... in my next (and last) blog on Deuteronomy 22:5.

[1] It's curious that some Christians teach the opposite of this particular law, claiming a divorced and remarried person must return to their first wife/husband.

[2] This section is summarized from "Dress and Ornamentation" by Douglas Edwards in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and "Clothing" by Roland Harrison and Edwin Yamauchi in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity*.

[3] Generally speaking, with the advance of time and increased wealth both men's and women's clothing became more ornate.

[4] Often, those who point out a difference between men's and women's clothing cite our text, Deut. 22:5.

4

Wisdom and the Emperor's New Clothes

Originally Posted on March 26, 2018

Of the four essays I've now written on this topic, today's may be the most important; but it requires a lot up front to set the stage for the main idea—please hang with me. Most OT theology (words about God and the life of faith) comes to us from Israel's priests and prophets. Both spoke about love for God, the history of God with Israel, and other shared themes. But while priests placed an emphasis on holiness, purity, and worship, prophets stressed justice, the rights of the oppressed, and Israel's broken covenant. Priests appealed to the *Torah* while prophets announced, "Thus says the Lord," based on God's direct revelation.

There is, however, another viewpoint in the OT: men and women from all walks of life (including some priests and prophets) who thought about life with God from a different perspective—the *sages*. Unlike priests, sages didn't appeal to the *Torah* for information or authority. And unlike prophets, they didn't claim direct revelation from God. Instead, they watched, observed, reflected, and learned from life and the world around them. Check out this compilation from the book of Ecclesiastes:

I saw under the sun that in the place of justice... (3:16); Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced... (4:1); Then I saw that all toil and all skill... (4:4a); I saw vanity under the sun... (4:7); If you see... the oppression of the poor... (5:8); There is a grievous ill that I have seen... (5:13); This is what I have seen to be good... (5:18); There is an evil that I have seen (6:1)

It's rather easy *to see*. The sages derive their understanding of God and life with God *from what they and others see and experience*. In a loose sense, their 'scripture' is the world God made and everything in it. The object of their quest is life beyond worship and covenants—life in the trenches of the daily grind. Sages seek wisdom: all that we can know about how to live a life that is good from studying how life and the world work—and they tell it the way they see it, regardless of tradition or assured results; if the emperor's clothes are invisible, they say so. What's more, the sages accept these insights as normative or God-given, just as much as a divine vision to a prophet or *Torah* to a priest. For this reason, we find many of their observations in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, and especially Proverbs—and a watchful eye can see wisdom's influence throughout scripture, including the gospels where Jesus often draws on insightful observations of the world and human nature.

Here comes the first big idea. The sages argued against a closed theological system in which everything had been decided that ever needed to be decided. Instead, they asserted a way of life that constantly learns and adapts. If this sounds risky, it is. It's the issue that propels the argument in the book of Job. Job's friends have a closed theological system: everything is already determined by the wisdom of their ancestors. Job claims, however, that we can't close our eyes to the present, to our experience and new insights into God's world. Of course his friends couldn't accept his claim or his experience because it violated what they already believed. So instead of opening their eyes and being receptive to new ideas (wisdom), they double-down on their accusations, terrified by the possibility that Job might be correct. They protect their doctrine and the God enclosed within it at all costs. They must, or the foundation of their theology will crack wide open and the earth will swallow their self-made security. By the end of the book they are staring at the emperor's "new clothes" unable to admit to themselves that the emperor is naked—all because they refuse to accept genuine wisdom. Do you recall who God said spoke correctly? (see Job 42:7)

Here's the second big idea: what does wisdom theology have to do with questions surrounding same-sex attraction? It all depends on a simple question: *what's the validity of wisdom in theological discussion today?* What role (if any) should the accumulated wisdom of our lives and 'secular' study play in faith decisions? I grew up in a loving church where the Bible and only the Bible was relevant in matters pertaining to God. For every question we turned to the Bible for an answer and dismissed any personal experience or other data as inadmissible evidence in the court of Christian orthodoxy. Could it be possible, however, that like Israel God provides us with another source of theological insight? Do we not also have sages among us, *believers* who observe and study life and God's world, experts who offer their insight to us? Insight we desperately need as we face issues Israel never imagined. Sages who, beginning with faith, observe, test, and analyze to discover new truth or wisdom about God's world. Certainly we have sages, believers who work in the 'soft' sciences such as psychology and anthropology as well as believers in the 'hard' sciences such as biology, chemistry, and medicine. We listen to our sages in many matters, but will we listen to what they have to say about same-sex attraction, transgender, intersex, and other related matters? If so—if we will listen, I suggest that our theology, our understanding of God's world and our practice of faith may be transformed.

I'm not a scientist. I invite those who are to share with us the wisdom they have gained in their discipline. All I can say is that research has revealed physiological differences among us: differences in chromosomes, in the hard wiring of the brain, and physical manifestations—differences present from the moment of birth and before, when God knit us together in our mother's womb (Ps. 139:13). For believing sages, all of these insights are theological insights, understanding God's creation and how it works. These findings do not belong to a separate 'secular' category that those with faith dismiss in decision-making. Rather, I suggest that these theological insights belong with careful reading of biblical texts. To neglect our sages for surface readings of the text seems to be a terribly foolish mistake.

If we accept the testimony of faithful sages about what they know to be true of those who are attracted to the same sex, those who are transgender, and others—as well as the testimony of believers with these experiences of life, we will begin to understand these matters and how to live as people of faith. We can dispel myths in favor of truth. And we can destroy fear with understanding. Of all places in the world, on a Christian campus God provides immense wisdom from every department and school. After all, this is one of the

great distinctions of a Christian liberal arts university. I regret that sometimes we fail to remember the very concept for which we exist and instead of providing our students with a model for seeking and listening to the wisdom God richly provides us, we take short-cuts to the so-called “clear teaching of Scripture.” As we face the complexities of the 21st century, my hope and prayer is that we will drop the pretense of knowing and understanding all that needs to be known. And instead, we will humbly seek out the faithful wisdom God provides us. For those watching us, the difference is no less than praising the emperor’s new clothes as he parades around or looking with the eyes of a child that cuts through the pretense to name truth: the emperor is naked.

This post draws on information in my forth-coming book, *A Life that is Good: The Message of Proverbs in a World wanting Wisdom* (Eerdmans, September 2018). My thanks to those who helped refine my thoughts in the book and in this essay.

5

Tattoos, Gibberish, and Homosexuality

Originally Posted on April 4, 2018

At a conference two excited youth workers approached and asked me to read the newly minted Hebrew tattoos on the back of their necks. I joined the fun, looked at the Hebrew letters, and impolitely began a gut-busting laugh. Unaware that Hebrew reads from right to left (not left to right) they spelled their desired word backwards so that instead of “gibbor” (“mighty man”) their tattoos read “robbig,” absolute gibberish in Hebrew (or perhaps a new term for “clueless”). Later, I wondered if they were aware of Leviticus 19:28 (the ban on tattoos) and had worked through this text or if they were indeed clueless? I’ll let the evidence stand for itself, written backwards in Hebrew on the back their necks.

Whether we read the OT or NT, bans on tattoos, or bans on same-sex practices we face the same set of questions: does this text state a principle that transcends time and culture? Or does this text wrap cultural clothing around primary principles (that transcend time)? So, for example, are tattoos wrong because Leviticus 19 expresses a principle that transcends time and culture? Or does Leviticus 19 simply put clothing on the principle of not worshipping other gods by forbidding ritual cutting and tattooing for the dead? Or, as in our recent discussions, does Deuteronomy 22:5 make a blanket statement against cross-

dressing? Or does this text forbid cross-dressing because this practice has to do with the worship of other gods (for ancient Israel)? Which is it and how do we decide? I call on Shooter Jennings, 2Pac, Supermax, Ricky Fante, and Janie Fricke for an answer (*just select your genre, decade, and sing-along*): “It ain’t easy.”

Though not my original plan, your response to prior posts now calls our attention to the remaining texts in the OT that “speak clearly” about homosexuality or same-sex relationships.¹ Both come from the book of Leviticus and begin:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman... (Lev. 18:22 NRSV)

If a man lies with a male as with a woman... (Lev. 20:13 NRSV)

It would be fast and easy to look at these texts and conclude that they are as clear as a cloudless day in West Texas: both speak against of male homosexuality. At least it’s easy until we slow down long enough to hear these texts against the backdrop of their literary and cultural contexts. Then we discover, “It ain’t easy.” In fact, at the end of the day we may disagree, but at least we will have a better understanding of these texts *and a much better understanding and appreciation of each other*. And so we begin.

Leviticus 18 (and 20) is unlikely to make any more sense than Hebrew read backwards unless we recognize several cultural and literary clues in the text. In fact, we need to understand at least eight starting-points before we read the verses in question.

- 1) While Leviticus 18 explicitly addresses men, it indirectly includes women. A reflection of a culture in which men led in arranging marriages, though women were not necessarily left out of the decision-making process (see Gen. 21:21; 24:5, 57-58).
- 2) Israel kept family allotments intact and property lines clear through marriages to near-relatives of the father (*patrilineal endogamy*). As a result, marriages were typically arranged within the clan, a subset smaller than the entire tribe (e.g., the tribe of Judah), but larger than the immediate family.
- 3) When Adam saw Eve for the first time, he declared that she is “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” and Genesis describes their new relationship as a process of

¹ See prior posts on Genesis 19 (“The Sin of Sodom? or America?”), Deuteronomy 22:6 (“RuPaul and the Clarity of Scripture” and “What not to Wear: Deuteronomy and the Clarity of Scripture”), and on the wisdom tradition (“Wisdom and the Emperor’s New Clothes”).

becoming “one flesh” (3:23-24). As we will see, Leviticus defines immediate family according to the concept of *one flesh*.

- 4) Those living in such a system of marriage must make a crucial distinction. On one hand, who belongs to the tribe and would make a good marriage partner? On the other hand, who belongs to my immediate family and is too close to marry because we already share *one flesh through marriage*? In Leviticus, if a man is already *one flesh* with a woman (by birth or through marriage) their marriage is forbidden. (Leviticus 20 works out the penalties for improper marriages described in chapter 18.)
- 5) The phrase “to uncover the nakedness” is a euphemism or polite way of saying something else. In this case, “to uncover...” does not mean to look at someone naked, but to have sex with them or (because they are one flesh) with their spouse. So in 18:7 to “uncover the nakedness of your father” means to *have sex with your mother or your mother-in-law* (18:8). Sorry if you’ve already had lunch.
- 6) Leviticus 18:6-18, however, is not a legalized list of sexual partners as if indiscriminate sex was appropriate for Israel. Instead, the formula for sexual behavior is employed to identify inappropriate marriage partners *for men* within the clan. Verse 6 uses generic language to introduce the topic: do not “approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness.” But by the end of this paragraph the idea of *marriage* is unmistakable as the writer prohibits uncovering “the nakedness of a woman and her daughter” and further clarifies that “you shall not take [marry] her son’s daughter...” (18:17), or “take [marry] a woman as a rival to her sister...” (18:18). *Marriage is the issue, not simply sex.*
- 7) So, Leviticus 18 defines immediate family as it lists forbidden marriages. Immediate family includes:²
 - mother and mother-in-law (18:7-8)
 - any sisters: full (by the same parents), half (sharing one parent), step (through marriage), or sisters-in-law (18:9,11,16)

² The forbidden nature of these relationships is stressed by phrases such as: “their nakedness is your nakedness” (18:10), “she is your father’s flesh” (18:12), “she is your mother’s flesh” (18:13), “it is your brother’s nakedness” (18:16), or even “they are your flesh” (18:17).

- daughter-in-law (son's wife, 18:15)
 - grandchildren (18:10)
 - aunts (father or mother's sister, 18:12-13, or uncle's wife on your father's side, 18:14)
 - An obvious omission from the list is most likely due to common sense: a man's own children are clearly "his flesh."
- 8) Finally, Leviticus 18:6-18 assumes that the normal practice in Israel is marriage between a man and a woman. No male relatives are forbidden because such marriage is beyond Israel's horizon. An obvious point for our reflection, *but please don't run for the ink to write a conclusion yet—lest we end up print our text backwards and end up with gibberish.*

We still have some distance to travel on the road to reading verse 22 and even further to go before we reach 20:13. Nonetheless, with these cultural and textual observations before us, I take my leave for us to contemplate what we've seen to this point *and for me to work on the next post: "Gibberish or Shirebbig? Reading the Ban on Male Intercourse."*

6

Gibberish or Shirebbig? Reading the Ban on Male Intercourse

Originally Posted on April 10, 2018

We love shortcuts in our fast paced society. After all, who needs to learn Hebrew to get a Hebrew tattoo? Why bother with cultural and literary contexts when we can read scripture and understand its “obvious” meaning? In concise terms, shortcuts can be dangerous. We may end up with Hebrew gibberish tattooed on our neck. Or worse, shortcuts can lead us to grossly misunderstand and misapply scripture. But let’s face it, taking the long way around isn’t easy: it may seem totally irrelevant to notice all that’s happening within in and around the text—a total waste of time. And such work promises all the excitement of a poorly prepared two-hour sermon.

So naturally, I continue to lead us on the long path toward reading Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. I wish we could have two hours together in a classroom. But since that’s impossible, before we ask questions or draw conclusions allow me to lay more information on the table. Only after I deal all my ‘cards’ (adding to [“Tattoos, Gibberish, and Homosexuality”](#)) will we be ready to ask good questions and handle the texts responsibly.[1]I promise to

deal from the top of the deck, working from the big to the small: 'big picture' observations to precise individual issues.

1. **Leviticus** responds to the crisis created by the Lord's presence among sinful people (see Exod. 33:1-5). How can this relationship work? The instructions in Leviticus are God's gift to Israel, providing a way to live together (it's called grace). In brief, God provides five links for an on-going relationship:

- Sacrifice to cleanse the tabernacle from the sins and impurity of the people (so the Lord can live there) and sacrifice to bring Israel and the Lord together in times of celebration (Lev. 1-7).
- Provisions for priests to tend to the Lord's tabernacle and instruct the people (Lev. 8-9).
- Instructions for how to deal with the impurity of the people so it does not pollute the tabernacle. Israel lived within a world of culturally defined notions of clean and unclean, pure and impure. The Lord deals with Israel within her own world—as she is, not “above culture” (Lev. 10-15).
- Instructions for how to cleanse the Lord's throne room (the holy of holies) so that the Lord can continue living with Israel (Lev. 16).
- Provision of a *Holiness Code*—see below (Lev. 17-26). Chapter 27 is an appendix to this section.

2. **The *Holiness Code***, in which our texts appear (18:22 and 20:13), is:

- A guide for Israelite life in the Promised Land: to enter and live in the land with God (18:24-30; 20:22-26).
- A guide for becoming like their God—to become holy, just as their God (the Lord) is holy; in other words, to be holy = looking and living like their God (see 20:7-8).
- The *Holiness Code* includes all aspects of life, from worship to social and sexual behavior. *It makes no distinction between these domains*, rather it interlaces ethics and worship (for example, see 19:1-12).
- Though God calls Israel to holiness (11:44), ultimately it is the Lord who sanctifies or makes Israel holy (20:8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32).

3. **Chapters 18-20** in the *Holiness Code*:

- Follow an introductory chapter about handling blood and why blood is significant (ch. 17).

- Are arranged into an A/B/A pattern:
 - [A] Forbidden marital/sexual relationships (ch. 18).
 - [B] Expressions of holiness in relationships and daily life (ch. 19).
 - [A] A code of punishment for the laws in ch. 18 (ch. 20).
 - The prologue (vv. 1-5) of Leviticus 18 emphasizes:
 - The Lord (alone) is Israel's God (18:2, 4e; see also 19:3e, 4e, 10e, 12e, 14e, 16e, 18e, 31e, 34e, 36b, 37e; 20:7e, 24b).
 - Israel is to be different from the people in Egypt and in Canaan because Israel has a different God. A person's g/God determines their behavior (18:3-5; see also 19:2, 36-37; 20:7-8, 22-26). When we describe what our God is like, we are describing what we are called to become.
4. **18:22 and 20:13.** Hold onto your hat as we dive head first into the shallow end of the swimming pool.
- Both texts appear in close proximity to prohibitions against serving other gods.
 - 18:22 follows the ban against sacrificing children to the god Molech (18:21) and an earlier warning against following foreign gods (18:2-5).
 - 20:13 also follows a ban against sacrificing to Molech (20:2-5) and against inquiring of mediums and wizards (associated with gods; 20:6-8).
 - 18:22 and 20:13 calls lying with a male as with a woman “an abomination” (Hebrew: *to'ebah*)—often a ‘trigger word’ that is used in hateful and harmful ways when discussing these texts.
 - “Abomination” (*to'ebah*) means *something abominable, detestable, or offensive*; or in verbal form (*ta'ab*) it means *to loathe, abhor, or act abominably*. That I think watching of Rudolph and the “Abominable Snowman” dates my age.
 - “Abomination” (*to'ebah*) occurs six times in Leviticus.
 1. Male-to-male intercourse is *to'ebah*—an abomination (18:22)
 2. Sex with an animal is *to'ebah*—an abomination(18:26)

3. The Canaanites committed “all of these” *to’ebah* and polluted the land (18:27).
 4. Anyone who commits these *to’ebah* shall be exiled from the people (18:29).
 5. Do not commit any of these *to’ebah* and pollute yourselves (18:30)
 6. Male-to-male intercourse is *to’ebah*—an abomination: both of them shall be put to death (20:13).
- Elsewhere in the Pentateuch:
 1. *to’ebah* most often denotes the worship of other gods: Deut. 7:25-26; 13:15; 17:4, 7; 18:9-12; 20:18; 23:18; 27:25; 32:16. (See also “What Not to Wear”).
 2. *to’ebah* sometimes describes cultural conditions: it is an abomination for Egyptians to eat or live with Hebrews (Gen 43:32; 46:34).
 3. Other abominations (*to’ebah*) in the Pentateuch include:
 - Dishonesty in business (Deut. 25:16).
 - Eating unclean food (Deut. 14:3).
 - Men wearing women’s clothing (Deut. 22:5). See “What Not to Wear”)
 - Remarrying a wife that you divorced after she married someone else (Deut. 24:4).[2]
 - The Hebrew words *to’ebah* and *sheqets* are synonyms (similar but not exactly the same in meaning or usage). As a noun or adjective *sheqets* also means *something detestable* or an *abomination*. In its verbal form, *shiqats* means *to detest, abhor, or make oneself detestable*. Consider the eleven times these two forms occur in Leviticus:
 1. It’s *sheqets* (detestable or an abomination) to eat anything from the water that doesn’t have fins and scales (e.g., lobster, clams, crawfish; 11:10-12).
 2. A number of birds are also *sheqets* (detestable or an abomination; 11:13).

3. Winged insects that walk are *sheqets* (11:20, 23).
4. All swarming creatures (moving close to or under the ground) and whatever moves on its belly (e.g., a snake) are *sheqets* (11:41-43).
5. Make a distinction between clean and unclean animals so that you do not bring *sheqets* (abomination) on yourselves (20:25).[3]

If you've made it this far I congratulate you for diligence beyond any normal expectation. I also promise that we are ready to begin asking essential questions such as: *is there a logical connection between the prohibitions in 18:19-23 and if so, what is it? And what are your "hole" cards, the cards only you can see? ...all in our next installment, "Texas Hold'em and the Homosexual Ban of Leviticus."* Until then, I leave you to ponder all that we have observed in this and my [preceding post](#). I admit there are a lot of details to think about, but it's worth the time—especially when the stakes are high.

[1] By no means is the information presented comprehensive. It would take a book to summarize and work through all the research on these texts.

[2] Oddly, some strongly anti-gay Christians advocate that those who are divorced should leave their second spouse and remarry their first spouse: what Deuteronomy calls "an abomination."

[3] *sheqets* also occurs in Deut. 7:26; Ps. 22:25; Isa. 66:17; and Ezek. 8:10

7

Texas Hold'em and the Homosexual Ban of Leviticus

Originally Posted on April 17, 2018

Over the past two weeks, I've dealt several 'information cards' regarding Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. As a reminder, these texts read:

You must not have sexual intercourse with a man as you would with a woman; it is a detestable [to'ebah] practice. (18:22, CEV; or "an abomination" NRSV)

If a man has sexual intercourse with a man as he would with a woman, the two of them have done something detestable [to'ebah]. They must be executed; their blood is on their own heads. (20:13, CEV; or "committed an abomination" NRSV)

Today it's time to play the game—to begin wrestling with the evidence (with endnotes for reference to earlier blogs, new sources, and details many may want to skip). Unfortunately, it's not possible to finish the game in one or even two posts; sorting through the proposals and our "hole cards" is going to take some time and patience. The question is what did

these texts communicate in their cultural and literary contexts? Today we examine one response (a second response will be posted on next Tuesday).

Possibility One: The prohibition of Leviticus 18:22 and punishment in 20:13 have to do with idolatry or the worship of other gods, not homosexuality in general. Four 'evidence cards' support this conclusion.

Card #1: Leviticus 18 begins with a reminder that the Lord (*Yahweh*) is Israel's God. Thus, Israel must no longer follow the gods of their old home (Egypt) or learn the practices of their new home (Canaan). Israel belongs exclusively to the Lord (Lev. 18:1-5).

Card #2: The prohibition (18:22) is sandwiched between two texts that forbid activities associated with the worship of other gods: child sacrifice to Molech (in Canaan, 18:22) and bestiality (in Canaan and Egypt, 18:23). In Canaan, sex with an animal (bestiality) appears to have been part of the annual reenactment of the Baal myth: signifying the dry season (death) followed by rain and renewed fertility (new life). Each year prior to his death Baal (represented as a bull) desires and has sexual intercourse with a heifer.³ As for Egypt, Herodotus reports that they held goats sacred and adds:

In the Egyptian language Mendes is the name both for the he-goat and for Pan. In my lifetime a monstrous thing happened in this province, a woman having open intercourse with a he-goat. This came to be publicly known." (Book II 46, Loeb Classical Library; or in a more recent translation by David Grene: *This was done in the nature of a public exhibition*).⁴

It is striking that only a chapter earlier Leviticus 17 established laws so that the Israelites would no longer offer sacrifices to goat-demons in the open fields (17:5-7). Douglas also observes that incest was part of the Pharaoh's religion and menstrual blood was also associated demons.⁵ If true, then the entire paragraph of

³ *He [Baal] desires a cow-calf in Dubr, A heifer in Shihlmemat-field; Lies with her time seventy-seven, ... times eighty-eight. She conceives and gives birth to Math.* (Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 139).

⁴ Mary Douglas (*Leviticus as Literature*, 237) states that copulation with a stallion was a public Vedic rite (1500-500 BC), the religion of Indo-European speaking people who entered India ~1500 BC.

⁵ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 236-237.

Leviticus 18:19-23 is about idolatrous practices (and perhaps all of chapter 18). In addition, each infraction calling for the death penalty in 20:10-16 relates to worship practices of another god.⁶ For the writer, the primary principle at stake in Leviticus 18 and 20 is single-minded allegiance to the Lord; the specific actions are cultural clothing.

Card #3: The term “abomination” (*to’ebah* in 18:22 and 20:13) most often refers to the worship of other gods (e.g., Deut. 7:25-26; 13:15; 17:4, 7).⁷ Leviticus appears to continue this usage, reserving this term for male-to-male intercourse (18:22; 20:13), sex with an animal (18:26), and those who commit “all of these” things (18:27-30).

Card #4: Later evidence reveals that Israel practiced male (and female) prostitution at the temple (I Kgs. 14:23-24; 15:12; II Kgs. 23:7; see also Deut. 23:17-18). In surrounding cultures, male prostitutes were sexual partners for men (not women).

Summary: When ancient Israel first heard these texts they instinctively knew that the real issue was the worship of other gods because they recognized the clues in the text and the presence of these practices in Egyptian and Canaanite religions. Mary Douglas best articulates the conclusion for this proposal:

The anathemas [18:22; 20:13] are not laws about everyday affairs... the context is inescapably cultic [religious/worship]... [They] refer to defilement of the land, a grave situation which results from idolatry...⁸

I have not presented a comprehensive case for the first proposal. I’ve just tried to play the cards in a way that makes sense to me—in a format that fits this space. Now, before I sign-off, fairness dictates that the weaknesses or counter-claims to these ‘cards’ be equally played.

⁶ Punishments for violations of instructions in Leviticus 18 are ordered according to severity in Leviticus 20. *Violations meriting the death penalty include:* the worship of Molech through child sacrifice (vv. 2-5), consulting mediums or wizards (other gods, v. 6), those who curse father or mother (v. 9), adultery (v. 10), sex/marriage to “father’s wife” or “daughter-in-law” (vv. 11-12), male-to-male intercourse (v. 13), marriage to a woman and her mother (v. 14), sex with an animal (vv. 15-16). *Lesser violations merit* being “cut off” from their people (exiled; vv. 17-18), or being “subject to punishment” (vv. 19-20), or dying “childless” (vv. 20-21).

⁷ See our earlier work in “___” and “___”

⁸ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 236.

Response to Cards #1-2: Although 18:22 may appear in a general context that emphasizes single-minded allegiance to the Lord, it does not explicitly mention another god or explicitly describe male-to-male intercourse as an idolatrous practice. The text simply speaks of male-to-male intercourse. In addition, Herodotus sometimes exaggerates or is loose with the truth (some call him, “The Father of History and Lies”). Evidence that associates male-to-male intercourse with the worship of other gods may not be as strong as claimed and in some cases it describes later eras.

Response to Card #3: The term “abomination” (*to’ebah*) does not always refer to the worship of other gods. Elsewhere it describes how Egyptians feel about shepherds and how God feels about dishonest business practices, unclean food,⁹ and men wearing women’s clothing.¹⁰

Response to Card #4: While Israel had male and female temple prostitutes (both in the service of men), neither Leviticus 18:22 nor 20:13 makes an explicit connection between male-to-male intercourse and temple prostitution.

Again, I do not claim this counter-analysis is comprehensive; it merely suggests the primary points of contention. So, for now, I take my leave and allow you the time to think through the evidence and *how the cards are played* for this first proposal. Please remember that we are not finished; we will play a second hand (proposal) on Tuesday, one week from today.

⁹ See *Gibberish or Shirebbig?*

¹⁰ See *What not to Wear*

8

Texas Hold'em and the Homosexual Ban of Leviticus

Originally Posted on April 24, 2018

For the record, this is the fourth entry on the texts in Leviticus 18 & 20 (see *Tattoos*, *Gibberish*, and *Texas Hold'em*) with two more yet to come. Last week we began examining the cards dealt face up on the table for all to see. More specifically, we wrestled with the literary and cultural evidence from the ancient Near East in order to understand the conclusion that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 have to do with the worship of other gods or idolatry, not homosexuality in general. Today, we conduct *Wrestle Mania II* as we reexamine these cards, continue wrestling with the evidence, and seek to understand a second possible conclusion.

Possibility Two: Leviticus 18:22 prohibits indiscriminate sexual intercourse between males. Some variations of this conclusion would also include or prohibit intimacy in committed same-sex relationships. As before, I will try to explain the evidence/arguments used to support this conclusion one card at a time. Then, in fairness I will provide brief counter-arguments (with endnotes for details many may wish to skip over).

Card #1: Leviticus 18:22 does not explicitly limit the circumstances in which male-to-male intercourse is prohibited. In other words, the prohibition is all-inclusive—whether religious in nature, indiscriminate sex, or in committed relationships.

Card #2: Genesis asserts a ‘biblical pattern’ for understanding marriage as a relationship between a male and a female (Gen. 2:21-24). This idea is often reduced to the unfortunate billboard slogan: *God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.*¹¹ God blesses the new relationship between male and female and encourages them to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28). Male-to-male intercourse violates God’s pattern for marriage and sexual intimacy, and frustrates God’s hope for reproduction.

Card #3: In Leviticus, the holiness code (chs. 17-26), like the purity code (chs. 10-15), upholds God’s created order (*as culturally understood by Israel*) for life at its best. In creation God established three primary environments for life: in the sky, under water, and on land. Though the purity laws are complex and strange to us, in general terms, clean animals live in only one environment and move according to the standards of that environment.¹² The Holiness Code also recognizes the boundaries God established in creation and teaches what it means to be *a pure or holy human*—a person God has called into covenant (an Israelite). Thus, male-to-male intercourse is wrong because it fails to respect the boundaries and orderliness of a holy life, and ultimately is not best for human life.

Card #4: When a person plays this hand (for this conclusion) he or she often appeals to the “clear teaching” of the New Testament: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and Jude 6. As a result, most read Leviticus 18:22 through the lens of these later texts and conclude that it also clearly banned homosexual behavior. After all, despite changes in culture, scripture testifies to the unified teaching of one God.

¹¹ I say “unfortunate” because while the billboard affirms the belief of those who agree, it antagonizes and alienates those who disagree. This is not the path to understanding one another.

¹² Thus, clean animals with wings fly in the sky, clean fish move under water with fins and scales, and clean land animals live *on* the land, walk or run with legs, and have split hooves and chew the cud (the ideal land animal from a shepherd’s perspective). Any animal that somehow confuses or crosses over these divisions is unclean: a lobster lives in the water but moves like a land animal (lacking fins and scales), a snake lives on land but moves by slithering (it also lives under the land), and an ostrich has wings but runs (unclean birds are especially difficult to understand). Any animal that doesn’t fit the ideal type for its environment (again, from a shepherd’s perspective) is unclean.

Summary: Leviticus 18:22 prohibits male-to-male sexual intercourse. Such sexual intimacy is wrong because:

- Leviticus makes an unconditional statement without exceptions.
- It disrupts God’s pattern of marriage and procreation.
- It confuses what is holy and best for human life.
- It violates the teaching of the New Testament.

Consequently, it doesn’t matter if male intercourse is in a religious setting (to worship another god) or in everyday life, whether it is practiced within a committed relationship (e.g., marriage), or it is indiscriminate sexual behavior. Male-to-male intercourse is wrong.

Counter-arguments:

Card #1: Leviticus 18 may not have stated explicit circumstances because the original readers would have automatically known the cultural context. Knowing the unstated cultural context is essential to understanding scripture (e.g., instruction about head coverings and long hair in 1 Cor. 11).

Card #2: Did Genesis 1-2 intend to set a pattern for all cultures and all time? If so, which parts of chapters 1-2 are part of the pattern? We appear to be selective and inconsistent in this matter. For example, the pattern includes a man leaving “his father and mother” {his father’s household} and “clinging” to his wife (Gen 2:24), but God’s directions in the remaining chapters of Genesis seem unaware of such a pattern.¹³ And as for consistency, would the pattern disallow sons from ever living back at home (with his parents) with their wives? Or what about the blessing for procreation: “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28)? If this is part of the pattern, may couples decide not to have children? May they delay starting a family? May they use birth control at all? The argument for a pattern sounds good when it convicts someone else, but not so good when it challenges our own assumptions and behavior.

Card # 3: The sense of order established in Leviticus was specific to Israel’s culture and based on her understanding of the world and her identity as God’s chosen people. Jesus

¹³ Noah’s sons and their wives stay with him (6:9-10; 7:13), Rebekah goes to Isaac and his family (24:52-67), Jacob goes to his mother’s family to take wives and stay, but later takes them away (28:2; 31:3,13), and his sons take wives who leave their parents to live with them and their patrilineal clan.

proclaimed that the laws that defined clean and unclean food—and clean (Jew) and unclean (Gentile) people were no longer relevant for the kingdom of God (Matt. 15:10-20; Mk. 7:1-23).¹⁴ In other words, if Leviticus 18:22 spoke against homosexuality because it disregarded proper cultural boundaries for holiness, ancient Israel’s cultural way of organizing the world is no longer relevant. *Besides, I like to eat lobster and barbecue pork sausage.*

Card #4: I’m not a New Testament scholar, but those I know assert that the texts are not as simple or clear, as they may appear to be in English translations. Like the Old Testament texts, on closer examination the texts are ambiguous and difficult to understand. In addition, the earliest readers of Leviticus did not have access to the New Testament; instead, they read and understood their Bible (the “O.T.”) for hundreds of years before the New Testament came along. Our project is to read and let the Old Testament stand on its own two feet.¹⁵ (I do appeal to those with adequate training to help us work through the N.T. texts.)

By no means have I presented a comprehensive case for reading Leviticus as a ban on all types of homosexual behavior. Nor have I presented a complete counter-analysis. As the Carpenters once sang, “We’ve Only Just Begun.” And even though we’ve almost come to the end of this series, I still urge you not to jump to any conclusions yet. We still lack two important blog posts on our topic: “The Cards in Your Pocket—Not up Your Sleeve” (next week) and “Ten Reflections or Fire, Aim, Ready” (the week after next).

¹⁴ After Jesus said this, he went to Tyre and Sidon, encountering a Canaanite woman along the way (Matt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30 see also vv. 31-35). Once Peter understood all food was clean, he realized he should call no person (Gentile) unclean (see Acts 10:28) and spoke to Gentiles.

¹⁵ In addition, reading the O.T. through the lens of the N.T. is like wearing amber-tinted sunglasses indoors. They may distort our vision, making a white dish look darker, more amber in color than pure white. The ways in which the N.T. uses and reads the O.T. is an extremely complicated issue. In most instances, we would be uncomfortable with a person using the same methods today.

9

The Cards in Your Pocket— Not up Your Sleeve

Originally Posted on May 1, 2018

When I was a young pastor I thought it would be fun to teach teenagers how to play poker... in the Sanctuary: an idea that didn't fly so well with one of our older members. Whether I've learned anything over the past 30 years, however, is debatable. On one hand, I have moved my poker lessons from the Sanctuary to the Internet. On the other hand, this is the third article in which I've described reading and understanding the Bible in terms of poker, specifically Texas Hold'em. I'm not sure which is worse.

Though I'm certain you've played poker in your local Sanctuary—or your local casino (ahem)—on the off chance someone doesn't know how to play, please allow me to explain.¹⁶

- Each player tosses their ante to the middle of the table and receives two cards dealt face-down: their “pocket cards” that they alone may see. Players now place their initial bets. (Additional betting occurs after each of the following stages.)

¹⁶ Especially since this is our third week at the table: see “Texas Hold'em” [1], and “Texas Hold'em” [2]

- The dealer flops three “community cards” face-up in the middle of the table.
- The dealer plays a fourth community card face-up.
- The dealer places a fifth community card face-up.

Using any combination of community cards and their pocket cards, each player creates their best set or “hand” of five cards. For example, if I have two aces in my pocket cards and the community cards include two aces, I can create a strong hand of four aces.

Over the past few weeks, we have been examining and assessing possibilities within the community cards: the culture, historical background, and the text itself (among other data cards). In this assessment we’ve seen how Leviticus 18:22 may be read as a ban against the worship of other gods and how these same cards may also be read as a ban against any same-sex intimacy. There was a time in my life when I would have ended the game at this point. After all, we now have all the available evidence before us. And isn’t our task to assess this evidence and determine *the correct interpretation* of the text? Isn’t the game about unbiased objective truth?

Since I first taught teenagers to play poker, I’ve learned that reading is more than objectively assessing the cards lying face-up on the table—the cards that we can all see and discuss. To be sure, these cards exist and they guide our reading; but comprehension or understanding isn’t that simple. We all have two more cards in our pocket; cards that only we can see and know. Cards that affect how we read and understand our world.

A few examples may help. When I was teaching, I discovered that young women and young men often read Hannah’s and Bathsheba’s stories differently. For most men, Hannah’s husband is a model of love and compassion. After all, when she is inconsolable over her infertility doesn’t he say, “Aren’t I worth more to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam. 1:8)? For most women, however, Hannah’s husband just doesn’t get it—he doesn’t understand her grief or that he is not the solution to her problem. For most men, David commits *adultery* with Bathsheba. After all, she is married at the time of their “affair.” For many women, however, David *rapes* Bathsheba: she is an innocent victim to his power. He is the one who is in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Bathsheba has little choice when the king’s men come knocking on her door (see 2 Sam. 11). In the same way, John Mark Hicks has spoken of his experiences teaching the story of the Prodigal Son and asking what caused

the son's poverty: he squandered his money (U.S. Americans), people didn't help him (Ugandans), and there was a famine (St. Petersburg, Russia).¹⁷

How can people read the same text and come to such different conclusions? It's simple: *every reader has two pocket cards*. In other words, *we are each dealt two unique cards that we alone see or know*. Sometimes we may choose to show our cards to others, explaining how they influence our understanding of the text. At other times our pocket cards may be similar to those around us, leading us to read the text in similar ways and tempting us to disregard those who differ from us. *Either way*, our pocket cards are diverse and lead us all to see things differently. It's as simple and complex as the difference between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, tree huggers and tree cutters. So only one simple question remains: what are our two pocket cards? What is it that uniquely influences us when we read texts like Leviticus 18:22?

Pocket Card #1: My identity (who am I?). When we read texts that speak about same-sex intimacy, my sexual identity comes into play. Am I male, female, intersex,¹⁸ gay, lesbian, bisexual, or sexually differentiated in another way? (By the way, I dislike these labels.) For many males it may be difficult to imagine not feeling male or not identifying with other males (so too for females). But if we listen carefully, we will hear people tell about these identities—*their* identities. And if we follow research in the sciences, we will discover what a medical doctor and church elder told me 20 years ago: research is demonstrating physiological differences in our brains that correspond to different sexual identities. Our identity is not a matter of choice or the way we have been nurtured; it's part of our physiological identity—the way God made or created us (see Ps. 139:13-16). The difficult question is not whether we recognize this card (who am I?), but whether we can admit how this card affects our reading with enough humility to accept and respect how someone with a different identity reads the text.

Pocket Card #2: My experience (what has happened to me or to those I love?). When I did a college internship, one of my elders held the absolute belief that the only acceptable condition for a second marriage (after divorce) was when sexual infidelity caused the divorce. Then, and only then, may the innocent spouse remarry. Fifteen years later I

¹⁷ I am told that John Mark Hicks discovered these differences while teaching in these places.

¹⁸ Intersex refers to persons born with both male and female genitalia.

returned to this church and discovered that this devoutly conservative elder had changed his mind. Why? I think it probably had something to do with his daughter marrying a man whose wife divorced him (and not because of her or his sexual infidelity).

Life teaches and changes us. Sometimes, men begin to think differently about the spiritual role of women in the church as they raise daughters. Often, parents of non-heterosexual children change their attitudes and convictions because of what they experience. In fact, I'd argue that if we see things exactly as we did 20 or even 10 years ago, we are simply not paying attention to what God is showing us. Spiritual wisdom, as we mentioned a few weeks back, is a matter of lifelong growth through careful observation of the world around us.

In the "game" of reading we all play with the same community cards: research and knowledge of the literary and cultural context surrounding the text. And we also play with two pocket cards: our identity and our experience. All of these cards shape our understanding of the text; they are the rules of the game. It's no more possible for a zebra to discard its stripes than it is for me to set aside these cards when I read.

I fought this concept for a long time. You might say, "I fought the law and the law won." I wanted to believe that the text alone controls (or should control) our understanding. And perhaps that would be true, if we were not humans with identities and experiences that shape us, inform how we see the world, and influence how we read texts. But we are humans, not gods above the fray. So I read Leviticus differently today than 30 years ago because I understand the literary and cultural contexts better and—like it or not, for better or worse, until death I do part—my pocket cards continue to change. I have a better understanding of my identity and a richer experience of God's world. And because I am human, both of these cards influence me when I read Scripture. Somehow, I think God not only understands, but also expects and hopes for this to happen—to keep us humble and to help us see more than our own narrow perspective.

So, if you don't mind me asking, "What are those two cards in your pocket today?"

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10

Same-Sex Intimacy and the Old Testament: Nine Reflections

Originally Posted on May 8, 2018

I never intended to write more than five posts on same-sex intimacy and the OT, much less nine. But now that we've looked at all four texts with some detail,¹⁹ it seems appropriate to take a step or two back and reflect on the bigger picture that has developed in our study. Moses needed *Ten* Commandments—I need only *Nine* Reflections (ahem).

9. **To steal a thought**, Ellen Davis writes, “whenever I find myself in the position of asking other Christians to make a sacrifice for which I am ineligible—if I as a heterosexual ask homosexual Christians to give up the possibility of a committed sexual relationship—then I should feel the inherent vulnerability of my position, because my ‘proclamation’ of *the gospel is costing others more than it costs me.*” (emphasis mine)²⁰

¹⁹ Gen. 19, Lev. 18:22; 20:13, and Deut. 22:5

²⁰ Ellen Davis, “Reasoning with Scripture,” p. 517 in the *Australasian Theological Review* (vol. 90).

8. **If we want to be taken seriously**, then let's be consistent with our use of the text. If we want to appeal to an OT passage that speaks against men wearing women's clothing (Deut. 22:5), then let's take the surrounding text seriously and not plant two types of seed in a field at one time (22:9), and stop wearing clothes made of two types of material (22:12). Outside of the two texts about same-sex intimacy in Leviticus, how many other texts do we know about? What does that say about us?²¹

7. **I am conflicted** by how much time we have spent discussing an issue that the OT speaks about so infrequently. On one hand, given our current situation we need careful study of these texts in their contexts and thoughtful theological reflection. On the other hand, it seems to me that if we want to be serious about revising employee codes, student handbooks, and church doctrine so that it is Biblical, we should start with what concerns God the most—what the prophets, priests, and sages speak about over and over again: pride, excess, prosperous ease, and the mistreatment of the poor and marginalized (e.g., Ezek. 16:49). Or to follow Isaiah, “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:16-17).

6. **It's unfortunate** that discussions about sexual identity tend to treat people as objects and problems. To the extent that I have fallen into this trap I apologize. No person should ever feel as if they are anything less than a valued and loved child of God. May God forgive us when we forget this and begin to speak about *those people, them, and that group* as a dehumanized problem to solve.

5. **Beware of patterns.** Just as it's easy to cite selected laws, it's also easy to find God ordained patterns (e.g., marriage between a man and a woman in Gen. 1-2). Patterns, however, have a way of trapping us in inconsistencies. For example, Genesis 1-2 also includes a man leaving his parents and the blessing of procreation (“Be fruitful and multiply...”). Which elements of are part of the pattern and who decides?

4. **It's funny** how easy it is to agree with my friends about “the clear teaching of Scripture”—because it's so obvious to us. And as long as we only listen to or read those with whom we share the same perspective, it will always be easy. Only when we get

²¹ Another writer raised this point and asked the same question. However, due to my excellent note taking skills I have lost the reference. If you can help with this information, please post it as a comment. Thanks.

outside of our group *and our culture*, will we have the opportunity to hear viewpoints we have never thought about and questions we have never raised.

3. I wonder what will happen in the future? In years to come will places of faith step forward to confess and ask forgiveness for the ways in which they treated their LGBTQ brothers and sisters? Will the future mirror the recent movement of some Christian universities that have begun work toward racial reconciliation? Will it be like the churches that are beginning to recognize and open doors to women that have been kept shut for centuries? Or will time lead in the opposite direction, toward a reassertion “traditional” values? I can’t help but wonder.

2. Whatever may come, one thing seems certain: LGBTQ Christians are not going to vanish. Nor are questions regarding same-sex intimacy going to leave churches alone, as if they can slip under the radar—unless, of course, their objective is to slip beneath the radar of cultural relevancy (God forbid the thought). Now is the time to think deeply, theologically, and critically²² about the text and our lives.

1. I wasn’t sure what I thought when we began eight weeks ago, I simply couldn’t believe anyone who had studied these texts would stake a claim to “the clear teaching of Scripture.” Now I have a better sense of what I think, but I’m not going to tell you because what I think doesn’t matter. It’s what you do with *the evidence and issues* raised over the past eight weeks that matters.

Now, finally my friends:

May the Lord bless us and keep us humble;

may the Lord slow our tongues and open our ears.

May the Lord help those unsure of their sexual identity;

may the Lord help us be aware of the pain we can inflict.

May the Lord lead us to understand the heart of God;

may the Lord give us strength to live into God’s image.

May the Lord make his face shine upon us,

and be gracious to us.

May the Lord lift his countenance upon us,

²² “Critically” means to ask the difficult questions, questions that are not always easy to answer.

and give us peace.²³

²³ See Numbers 6:24-26