

THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Oct 9, 2005

Growing up a Baptist preacher's kid, back in the 50's in small town Oregon, I was pretty conversant with the Bible, if a bit confused by some of its meanings. In my family, we were rewarded for every scripture verse we learned and could recite at family meals---I think it was a penny apiece, which in those days eventually mounted up.

Of course, there were the easy ones: "Jesus wept" was a favorite and some of the begats were fun to say: so and so begat so and so, including names like Enoch, Methuselah, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Of course, we were just getting old enough to understand what "begat" really implied, so it was always with a smothered giggle that we would repeat those words.

Revelations was a challenge and we didn't even try to figure it out, we just reveled, so to speak, in some of the imagery, which included horses and a lot of the use of the word seven, which seemed cool at the time.

And I can remember one particular occasion on which my Sunday School class---led by me, uncharacteristically for me, then-- asked our teacher a leading question: "Mr. Mayberry, what is circumcision and why was it so important to the Jews?"

Now, I expect that Bob Mayberry had seen a lot and had heard a lot of questions in his work as the postmaster in Athena, Oregon, but he was stumped by this question from a bunch of 11 year old girls, some of whom had little brothers and knew what the word meant, if not its ritual meaning.

He ended up referring us to yet another scripture passage about Jewish rituals and advised us that in the Christian scriptures, circumcision was a ritual act that was unnecessary to be Christian. The implication, of course, was that the Christians knew better about such things than the Jews, so we didn't need to worry our pretty little heads about it.

Hmmmm. That wasn't the first time I'd come up against Bible passages that contradicted each other. And it wasn't the last, either, so gradually I came to believe strongly in only those passages which seemed to make rational sense, which affirmed my own experience and led me toward greater love for God and for others, not less.

As I matured and learned more about human beings and myself, I encountered the disconnect between law and justice. I learned that there were laws that were not just. I learned that there were some laws people ignored and others which they enforced.

When I began to realize that I had a number of friends and students who were gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, I encountered yet another disconnect-----the practice of deeming certain ancient laws from Bible texts as sacrosanct and ignoring others which were less convenient. I speak, of course, about the purity laws which the radical right uses as its weaponry in the persecution of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. And I have since then made a study of this topic.

What does the Bible really say about Homosexuality? What are the texts, from Hebrew and Christian scriptures, which are used by some conservative groups to justify discrimination and even outright persecution of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons?

Let me list them, with a brief description of each passage and then go back and unpack each one a little more. Genesis, the first book in the Hebrew Scriptures, tells the Creation story of Adam and Eve, their residence in and eventual expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and subsequent life beyond the Garden.

Again, the book of Genesis in a later chapter tells the story of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the Hebrew God sent two angels to warn Abraham's nephew Lot about impending doom for the city of Sodom. Some of the men of Sodom came to Lot's house to attack and, according to popular opinion, to rape the angels. Lot fended them off by offering the men of Sodom his virgin daughters instead to use sexually, an offer which was rejected.

The angels then protected Lot's household from the mob by striking the men of Sodom blind, while Lot and his family escaped the city. This is also the story in which Lot's wife looked back at the burning city and was turned into a pillar of salt for her disobedience.

In the book of Leviticus, we find the Holiness Code of the early Hebrews, a standard of behavior which is meant to distinguish the Hebrews from the Canaanites, whose land they have been given by the God of Israel. The punishment for violating the Holiness Code is death.

For example, children who curse their parents are to be put to death. The sentence for adultery for both parties is death. The punishment for incest or bestiality is death. And the punishment for males lying with males as with females is death.

About halfway through the Christian scriptures in the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul writes to the Romans about “dishonorable passions”, men and women exchanging natural relations for unnatural relations, committing shameless acts and being punished for this offense.

Later in the Christian scriptures, Paul expands upon this theme in letters to the Corinthians and to his disciple Timothy by discussing how Christians ought to live, putting their old lives behind them. These references are specifically about the typical sins of “Gentiles”, whose characteristics are willfulness, lust, exploitation, avarice, self-deception, narcissism, and idolatry. Persons who fit this profile were deemed unfit for the kingdom of heaven and Christians were warned to put these behaviors behind them.

These six Bible passages have been used, particularly in recent years, to justify hate crimes, oppressive church laws, and denial of human rights to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. But let’s take another look at them through the lenses of context and language.

First of all, the Creation story in Genesis is indeed about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, as the critics delight in saying. What the story portrays is the world experience of those human beings who wrote it. And there IS only one way to propagate the human species, and that is through union of sperm and egg.

But to use the Creation legend as a reason for promoting heterosexuality as the only legitimate sexual stance is to make the weakest possible argument, the argument from silence or omission.

Just because homosexuality is not mentioned, It does not logically follow that heterosexuality is the only form of appropriate sexuality. Friendship is not mentioned in the Creation story either; but we do not assume that friendship is abnormal or condemned.

The Creation legend is not a paradigm about marriage but rather about the establishment of human society. To assume that it is a recipe for the only allowable human diversity is to give very little credence to the intelligence and responsibility of human readers.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 is perhaps the most famous instance in the Bible where homosexuality is said to be condemned, and, in fact, it is the source of the word “sodomy” which has, over time, connoted everything from ordinary heterosexual intercourse in non-missionary position to oral sexual contact with animals.

In the King James Version of the Bible, the term “sodomite” refers to male prostitutes in the houses of worship of Canaanite and Babylonian fertility cults.

The conventional thinking is that the city of Sodom was destroyed because its inhabitants practiced homosexuality. This is because of the Hebrew word for “know” which is used in the demands of the men of Sodom--that Lot send out the angelic visitors so that they might “know” them. The conventional assumption is that this means to “know” in the carnal or sexual sense.

However, biblical scholarship reveals that this Hebrew word is rarely used in a sexual sense. It occurs 943 times in the Hebrew scriptures and only in ten of these times does it denote a sense of carnal knowledge or sexual intercourse. This passage in Genesis is the only place in the Hebrew scriptures where it is commonly believed to refer to homosexual intercourse.

Sodom is referred to throughout the Hebrew scriptures as a place of wickedness, but nowhere does it state that homosexuality was the wickedness in question.

In my opinion, sexual violence is one of two sins portrayed by this story, whether it is homosexual rape of two angels (assuming that angels have a gender identity--I was always taught that angels were neither male nor female) or the possible heterosexual rape of Lot's daughters. Lot was prepared to give his daughters' virginity to a gang rape and that idea provides an additional horrifying aspect to this story which has nothing to do with sexual orientation. The other sin is lack of hospitality.

The laws portrayed in Leviticus were designed for a particular purpose and a particular setting. Their purpose is nation-building; their setting is the entry into a promised but very foreign land. These are fundamental laws for the formation of a frontier community. Not only are the pioneers in the Promised Land told to honor their parents and keep the Sabbath, but they are to show appropriate hospitality and abstain from idol worship. They are forbidden to permit cattle inbreeding, or to sow fields with two kinds of seed, or to wear garments made of two different kinds of materials.

Fruit trees may not be harvested until the 5th year and kosher laws must be kept. Certain hairstyles were forbidden as were tattoos. They could not consult mediums or wizards. Men could not have sexual relations with their wives while they were menstruating.

These and many other actions are condemned because they weaken the cultural identification of the children of Israel, according to the cultural thinking of the time. So great is the principle of ritual and ethnic purity that to violate it is to warrant a death sentence in this frontier time and place.

The word often used in the Code to describe such offenses is “abomination”. However, the word abomination does not describe something evil, but rather something which was considered at that time ritually impure for the children of Israel, like eating pork or intercourse during menstruation.

In this context of cultural identity, protection, and procreation, homosexual conduct WAS a risk. However, human beings no longer live as God’s frontier folk in the promised land. When people of faith ignore most of the Holiness Code and regard it as irrelevant to their understanding of proper behavior, yet cite the Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality as the reason they believe homosexuality to be bad, it seems to be less thoughtful than expedient.

Jesus, who, according to the Christian scriptures, came to “fulfill the law and the prophets”, turned the Holiness Code on its ear, as did Paul the Apostle, when both of them essentially flouted many of its strictures by touching the sick and healing them on the Sabbath, by taking their message to outsiders, including Gentiles and the ritually impure, by saying, in essence, that purity laws were no longer necessary in the eyes of God, that they kept people from belonging, and that being intrinsically right is more important than being ritually pure.

Let’s turn now to the writings of Paul the Apostle, in Romans, First Corinthians, and First Timothy. Paul’s most significant comments on what we call homosexuality occur in Romans, when he writes “For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

Context is essential here. Paul’s context was a world in which his newly-Christian followers were struggling to leave behind foreign worship practices, including male and female prostitution. Again, these were folk in a frontier situation, even though they lived in a civilized land. They were carving out new ground in a hostile environment and were admonished to keep to themselves, to avoid the practices of rival cults, and to steer clear of the temptation to gossip, slander, boast, disobey God, worship false idols, and engage in anything but sexual conduct which could result in procreation and therefore propagation of the Christian family.

Our 21st century minds, looking at the words “dishonorable passions”, “unnatural relations” and “shameless acts”, are conditioned to go straight to sex. Never mind that there are many dishonorable passions, unnatural relations, and shameless acts in the universe. We MAY easily assume that these words refer to homosexuality, forgetting that a lack of love, kindness, and respect are far MORE harmful to others and ourselves than acts of mutual affection and attraction, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sexual acts which involve lust and avarice, an imposition of will upon another, and an exploitative relationship are wrong, regardless of who does what and to whom. In Paul’s day, the only same-sex activities he was probably aware of were pederasty, when an adult male exploited a younger male for sexual purposes, and male prostitution, both common practices in the communities of the time.

In First Timothy, “sodomites” are found on the list of the lawless, those who commit Gentile sins, but we now know that “sodomite” refers almost exclusively to male prostitutes, and is not a synonym for homosexual, as we understand that term.

There are no other references to homosexuality in the Christian scriptures. Jesus never mentions sexual behavior, other than to forgive the woman caught in an adulterous relationship. He associates with known outsiders, such as women and lepers and tax collectors and performs ritually impure acts right and left, during his short life. Modern Christians recognize Jesus as someone to revere and worship.

Sometimes, however, the real Jesus is overlooked, in favor of doctrinaire prejudices which distort his message and assume that, as the notorious preacher Fred Phelps would say, “God Hates Fags”. Fred Phelps, you may remember, is the Wichita preacher who appears at the funerals and memorial services of AIDS victims and even picketed the memorial service for Matthew Shepard, the young man who was beaten and hung on a fence to die in Laramie, Wyoming, with his signs and jeers of revilement.

Why is it so hard for people to move beyond cursory interpretations of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? Those who have undergone a shift in their own perspectives may have a hard time understanding the perspectives of those who have felt well-served by their childhood faith.

The basic problem is that for very conservative Christians, Biblical authority and reliability is at stake. When one has learned to revere and trust words that are deemed sacred and charged with deep meaning, it isn't easy to shift that understanding and let go of the prejudices and fears which inform one's take on problematic texts.

Thus, the battle for the Bible, of which homosexuality is the last front, is really the battle for the prevailing culture, of which the Bible itself is a mere trophy or icon. It is hard to admit that one's understanding and reading of sacred texts might be wrong, and that both the Bible and the God who inspired it are more gracious, just, and inclusive, than they themselves can presently manage to be.

The biblical writers very likely never contemplated a form of sexual expression in which same-sex persons lived out loving, monogamous, faithful relationships together. All they knew of same-sex relationships was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness and exploitation. These qualities, of course, are found across the entire range of sexual expression and to define contemporary same-sex relationships only in these terms is a cultural slander.

It's not about sex or how people "do it". It's not about having babies or having fun. It's about fear-----fear of what we don't understand, fear of the Other, fear of being different, fear of life and all its options.

May we model love instead of fear. May we model inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness. And may we model a community in which all are equal, all are acceptable, and all are loved.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #123, Spirit of Life.

#### BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we have gifts to offer to each other and to the larger community. Our second principle of Unitarian Universalism reminds us that we covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Let us go now in peace and offer these gifts to the world. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.