

St. John's Lutheran Church Winter Bible Study
"The Bible and Homosexuality"
Session Four – Holiness Codes and Vice Lists

Holiness Code in Ancient Israel

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev 18:22)

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." (Lev 20:13)

These verses are part of the *Holiness Code* found in Leviticus, chapters 17-26

- ~ the guiding principle in Leviticus is God's command: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2) – "holy" (Hebrew, *kadosh*) means "separate, apart, sacred" (BDB, Hebrew Dictionary)
- ~ the commands of the Holiness Code were given to the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the Holy Land, and were "designed to provide a standard of moral behavior" that would distinguish them from the Canaanites and other surrounding nations (Gomes, page 153):
"You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. You shall not follow the practices of the nation that I am driving out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I have said to you: You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples." (Lev 20:22-24)
- ~ the Holiness Code defined the "religious, civic, and cultural identity" of the people of Israel (Rogers, page 71) – it fostered the faithfulness, integrity, and growth of the community – it was given to a particular people in a particular time and place for a particular purpose

The Holiness Code defines "holiness" primarily in terms of ritual purity

- ~ faithfulness to God – including proper worship (e.g., Lev 21-22)
- ~ no 'mixing' with people of other nations – including no intermarriage (e.g., Deut 7:1-4)
- ~ maintaining a strict social hierarchy – including male gender superiority (e.g., Lev 20) (Rogers, page 72; also Gushee, page 67; Nissinen, pages 42-43)

Maintaining Gender Status

The APA (American Psychological Association) defines “gender” as

“the condition of being male, female, or neuter. In a human context, the distinction between gender and sex reflects the usage of these terms: Sex usually refers to the biological aspects of maleness or femaleness, whereas gender implies the psychological, behavioral, social, and cultural aspects of being male or female (i.e., masculinity or femininity)

(<https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>)

The language of these verses suggests that the prohibition is primarily about maintaining the gender status of men in the society:

“You shall not lie with a male *as with a woman...*”;

“If a man lies with a male *as with a woman...*”

- ~ The primary concern indicated is a man being ‘as a woman’ in sexual relationships – same-sex male acts were an offense to the status of the male
- ~ There is no prohibition against lesbianism in the Old Testament
- ~ *If* the primary concern were same-sex relations and not gender roles, *then* wouldn’t these verses state: “a man shall not lie with a man and a woman shall not lie with a woman”

Defining “Abomination”

“...it is an *abomination.*” (Lev 18:22)

“...both of them have committed an *abomination...*” (Lev 20:13)

Variations of the Hebrew word “*toevah*” (*abomination*) – “of physical repugnance to God and his people” (BDB, Hebrew Dictionary) – are used *117 times* in the Old Testament, especially in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, and Proverbs (Gushee, page 64) – for example

- ~ “You shall not eat any *abhorrent* thing” – including pork, rabbit, shellfish (Deut 14:3-21, Lev 20:25, Lev 11)
- ~ “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an *abomination* to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.” (Prov 6:16-19)
- ~ “If he has a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things (though his father does none of them), who eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits *abomination*, takes advance or accrued interest; shall he then live? He

shall not. He has done all these *abominable* things; he shall surely die; *his blood shall be upon himself.*” (Ezek 18:10-13)

The Holiness Code is composed of numerous commandments – for example

- ~ “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” (Lev 19:17)
- ~ “You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God.” (Lev 19:2)
- ~ “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” (Lev 19:19)

The Holiness Code calls for the death penalty in numerous cases – for example

- ~ “All who curse father or mother shall be put to death; having cursed father or mother, *their blood is upon them.*” (Lev 20:9, also Deut 21:18-21)
- ~ “A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned to death, *their blood is upon them.*” (Lev 20:27)
- ~ “Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands on his head, and let the whole congregation stone him.” (Lev 24:14)

From the days of the Early Church, Christians have made distinctions between those commandments of the Holiness Code that apply to Christian morality and those that do not – “While the material cannot simply be dismissed, the Christian Church has consistently taught that the Holiness Code is not determinative for Christian behavior or ethics.” (Powell, page 24)

Setting Aside the Holiness Code

Jesus Christ is determinative for Christian behavior and ethics.

Jesus shifted the understanding and practice of “Holiness” from external codes and hierarchical social structures to internal motivations and loving relationships.

- ~ On eating with “unclean” hands – “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:18-23, also Matt 15:1-20, Luke 11:37-41)

- ~ In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (5:8) – and his words on authentically keeping God’s commandments (5:17-48)
- ~ On ‘breaking’ the Sabbath – “Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’” (Mark 2:27-28, also Matt 12:1-14, Luke 6:1-11, John 5:1-18, 7:23-24)
- ~ Jesus said to his disciples, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-43, also Matt 20:25-27, Luke 22:25-27, John 13:1-20) ...

Peter, Paul and Barnabas, James, and the members of Early Church followed the example of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit at the Council of Jerusalem in setting aside the Holiness Code and welcoming Gentiles into the Church (Acts 15). (*See notes from session two.*)

The Levitical prohibition against same-sex relations between men is part of a Holiness Code that contemporary Christians affirm, in both doctrine and practice, is no longer binding for Christian ethics or moral behavior. Why not set aside the Holiness Code in affirming publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships?

Vice Lists in Paul’s Letters

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [Greek, *arsenokoitai*] sodomites [Greek, *malakoi*] thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

“This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites [Greek, *malakoi*], slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.” (1 Timothy 1:9-11)

In these passages, Paul employs *vice lists*

- ~ lists of vices and virtues used as a rhetorical strategy in Greco-Roman and Jewish literature for moral education
- ~ also found in Rom 1:29-31, Gal 5:19-23, and 2 Tim 3:1-5 – which “seem to reflect general concerns of Hellenistic Jews about the deplorable state of Greek society” (Rogers, page 73)
- ~ vice lists are summaries, “rarely referring to the actual contexts of the vices or to the real people to whom the text is directed” (Nissinen, page 113)

- ~ the word “fornication” – Greek *porneia*, “unlawful sexual intercourse” (BDAG, Greek Dictionary) – is understood to refer to any sexual relationship outside of marriage

Two Ambiguous Words

Two words used in these *two verses* (1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10), with the *two verses* Rom 1:26-27, constitute the primary New Testament texts historically used to affirm “homosexuality is a sin.” The meaning of these two words – *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* – is highly contested.

- > The word *malakoi* means –1) pertaining to being yielding to touch, *soft*; 2. pertaining to being passive in a same-sex relationship, *effeminate* (BDAG, Greek Dictionary)
 - ~ the only other use in the New Testament describes *soft* clothes (Matt 11:8, Luke 7:25)
 - ~ in Greco-Roman sources, *malakoi* is used to speak of “frailty of body or character, illness, sentimentality, or moral weakness” (Nissinen, page 118) – it might refer to a man who is *effeminate*, “which in that culture was treated as a moral failing” (Rogers, page 74) – it might refer to the “passive partner in a pederastic relationship” or a “male prostitute” (Nissinen, page 117)
 - ~ *malakoi* has been translated in the New Testament as (biblegateway.com): “effeminate” (KJV, NAS), “male prostitutes” (NRSV, NLT), “sodomites” (RSV), “homosexuals” (LB), “those practicing homosexuality” (NIV), “sexually uncontrolled or perverted” (Phillips) – this variety demonstrates the uncertain meaning of the word
- > The word *arsenokoitai* means “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex, *pederast*” (BDAG, Greek Dictionary) – though this definition is debated
 - ~ scholars believed Paul coined this phrase – this seems to be the first time *arsenokoitai* is used in either Greco-Roman or Jewish texts (Nissinen, page 115)
 - ~ a composite of *arseno*+*koitai* (“man”+“bed” – “bed” referring to a sexual act) – and may be derived from the Holiness Code, “lies with a male” (Lev 20:13) is *arsenos koiten* in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) (Nissinen, page 114)
 - ~ while the word indicates same-sex activity between men – there is no mention of same-sex activity between women in these discussions – there is no interpretive consensus as to *what* sexual activity Paul means
 - ~ Dale Martin suggests the use of the term in later Greek literature refers to “forced prostitution” (Gushee, page 78)
 - ~ James Brownson suggests the vice list refers to sexual trafficking (Gushee, page 79)

- ~ Robin Scroggs suggests the term refers to pederasty (Nissinen, page 116)
- ~ *arsenokoitai* has been translated in the New Testament as (biblegateway.com): “homosexual offenders” (NIV), “practice homosexuality” (NLT), “male prostitutes” (NRSV), “both participants in same-sex intercourse” (CEB, including *malakoi*), “abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV) – this variety demonstrates the uncertain meaning of the word

It is fair to state that Paul has only negative things to say about same-sex conduct as he perceived it, “yet it would be hazardous to make Paul’s text address something it does not address. It is not fair to claim Paul would condemn all homosexual activity everywhere, always, and in all forms. Paul’s arguments are based on certain Hellenistic moral codes that are culture specific and that have their own trajectory in tradition.” (Nissinen, page 124)

“Condemnation of a certain kind of homosexuality in a particular context does not imply a necessary rejection of every expression of homosexuality in every context – nor does a general repudiation of homosexual acts preclude the possibility of exceptions” (Powell, page 26) – in other words, to state that sexual abuse (rape, promiscuity, prostitution, adultery) between people of the opposite sex is wrong, is not to state that heterosexuality or heterosexual relationships are wrong – why not apply this same standard to homosexuality and homosexual relationships?

The uncertainty of the meaning of these two words in Paul’s letters makes it difficult to rest a moral position regarding homosexuality on them. Why not affirm that Paul is not addressing publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships in these “vice lists”?