

June 30, 2024

Sexuality Without Shame

BEYOND BELIEF

**REINTERPRETING
HOMOSEXUALITY
IN THE BIBLE**



DISCLAIMER

Please note the following information was written as a personal essay, and should be taken as personal opinion, not fact. I am not a biblical scholar, just a girl who asks questions and used to be a research assistant.

Smooches,
~Sabrina~



CONTENTS



01	INTRODUCTION
02	SEXUALITY IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME
03	THE SIX PASSAGES
04	WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN

PART 1

INTRODUCTION



Reinterpreting Homosexuality in the Bible

A few months ago I was talking to a friend about my coaching business, the clients I focus on, and how I am getting more and more interested in the idea of specifically working with women who grew up in religious households and were ready to deconstruct and reframe the sex-negative messages that are so pervasive in religions. I have long been fascinated by religion but have been an Atheist since my family stopped going to church when I was 10. Do I know enough or understand enough that I could be a good coach for women who grew up in a world so different from mine? Like what do I know about religion and what it's like to grow up in a restrictive household?

After talking through it, I realized that having such a different background may be exactly what makes me a good coach for women who grew up in sexually restrictive households. As an outsider I can offer a different perspective and a space free from judgment. And since I am genuinely fascinated by religion, I have a general knowledge and respect of the topic and can come at it with compassion and knowledge.

So me being me, I jumped in and decided I had to do research. What ARE the messages people are receiving from the church? If I am going to do this then I want to be able to speak to people in the same language they grew up in and speak to that voice in their head telling them their body is a sin because they are experiencing sexual desire. If I am going to help women reframe the messages they received and begin to see the joy and pleasure they can have with their sexuality, I want to know exactly what I am up against.

I went back to my friend and told her my plan, and this being Pride month she suggested I read the book *God and the Gay Christian* and watch the movie *1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted Culture*. Both are about examining homosexuality and same-sex marriage within the bible, and little did my friend know that she was about to send me down one hell of a rabbit hole.

As an Atheist my biggest roadblock with the bible and religion in general is that questions are not welcomed – you are supposed to take things “on faith.” Well sorry, I have an ADHD brain that loves deep diving on topics it hyper-fixates on, so that will not work for me. And to be quite honest I could never get over the fact that the Bible is said to be the word of God, but... it's been written, translated, interpreted, re-translated and re-interpreted, all by men. I try my best to remain respectful of religions but there are just too many parts of it that I cannot reconcile with my lived experience. And mainly I am just way too cynical to trust and believe something that I see as basically written by misogynist men.



But I do still find the concept of religion so intriguing. I often say I wish I could be religious – I wish I could have so much faith in something that I don't question it. To be able to so fully dedicate myself to something. To believe that anything happens after we die, other than we just get put in a hole in the ground. But I don't and I can't. And working in sexual health for as long as I have, it's hard to overlook all the harm that religious teachings have done to women and women's bodies. And well, the focus on masculinity isn't great for men either, but sexual teachings are just so much worse for women.

So once I decided that yea, I do want to focus on women who are leaving sexually restrictive religions and help them learn to fall in love with their sexuality, I did what I do best. I started researching and I started learning. And while I was doing my research to start refocusing my coaching business, knowing that was going to take quite a while to come to fruition, I decided that at the same time I would read that book my friend suggested, *God and the Gay Christian*. It's Pride month after all, maybe the book would give me some ideas on things to write about.

God and the Gay Christian is about affirming same-sex marriage in the church, written by someone who remains a true believer that the Bible is the word of God. That part was what intrigued me the most. I have read some books and articles on LGBTQ-affirming theology, or critiques of the church's teaching on homosexuality, and they were usually written by outsiders, or people who had left the church. I was really interested in reading what someone still active in the church would have to say. I am pretty sure I read the book in about 3 days and thus began my deep-dive into Biblical teachings on same-sex intercourse and homosexuality.

Of note – I will probably use the phrase “same-sex intercourse” or “same-sex behaviors” throughout this post, even though I am not a huge fan of either term. As we will see in another blog (!!!!) “homosexual” or “homosexuality” does not actually appear in the Bible, and as I explain later, much of what the bible does have to say about what we would call “homosexuality” is actually completely different from how we see it today. So all of those words will be used somewhat interchangeably even though I feel like none are quite adequate.

And, well, I am going to piss off so many people. But I guess talking about sex does that anyways, might as well throw myself off into the deep end.



Throughout the research I have done for this (and I actually did A LOT of research for something that will be read by like 5 people, probably mainly my mother), I kept coming back to one thing. If god is benevolent, and one of the teachings that even I as an Atheist hear all the time is “love thy neighbor,” then WHY and HOW are his words used to oppress entire groups of people (if you believe the bible is the word of god)? As I read the passages over and over again, a thought somewhat crystallized.

It seems to me, reading and re-reading certain passages AND looking at the different ways passages have been translated from ancient languages to modern English, that the Bible itself, the word of God if you will, actually does lean towards inclusion, safety, respect for thy neighbors, and so on. And that is when it hit me that the bible itself actually does seem to lean towards inclusion, but the INTERPRETATIONS – that were written, translated, re-written and re-translated by men – lean towards exclusion and oppression. (Gee I wonder why... couldn't have anything to do with cultural biases at the time could it?)

I may or may not have messaged a friend in a huff because I was so mad that some of these passages so clearly (to me!) speak to the importance of hospitality and inclusion but were twisted to retrofit the narrative that the sin being discussed was homosexuality, NOT inhospitality. I wish I could remember who said this, and I am definitely going to have to get better about writing this stuff down – but maybe we can look at the Bible as a cross-cultural text addressing specific issues of its time, a text that was written for specific reasons, not as a strict moral code for how we should all live our lives now in 2024.

Runs and hides away from people who will scream at me that I don't know what I am talking about

As I have been thinking about this blog and what I wanted my thesis to be and what the throughline was, other than “I have ADHD and I really wanted to learn what the bible says about homosexuality” I propose this question. What if we looked at religious texts (in this case the bible) as moral thought exercises that are meant to be wrestled with, engaged with, and used as outlines, not manuals, for the development of our own moral and ethical codes? Why else would so much of the bible be written in allegory and parable? Could it be that the bible was meant to spark debate? And what if, when we are creating our own moral and ethical code, we remember that the bible leans towards inclusion and hospitality, and respect for others, and so our moral code should lean the same? It seems to me that inclusion, respect for others, hospitality, and harmony are pretty fucking major throughout the whole damn thing.

Runs and hides again



Now I am no biblical scholar, just a girl who has always found religions fascinating and loves to waste time on deep dives; but even I know that interpretations of the bible have shifted massively in the last few years. Hell if you read it literally, as many do, then none of us should be wearing clothes with mixed fibers, eating unclean foods, I should probably be a slave because I am half-Black but maybe my white side would save me, and also oh yea, women – say goodbye to any rights you have (the fact that I realized as I was writing that out that I am describing a future that a lot of people actually want *EYE ROLL*).

But anyways, all that to say that there have already been massive changes in interpretations of the bible, why can't we say the same about LGBTQIA+ inclusion? After all, current evangelical teachings around same-sex intercourse seem to be pretty out of character with the God who was revealed in Jesus. That guy hung out with sex workers and shit, right? Love thy neighbor, I am benevolent, all that jazz. So maybe we should look at how and why the ways we interpret his work seems so incongruous with everything we supposedly know about the guy and his character? But again! This is why I am an Atheist – I question things too much and have found that a lot of religious teachings around same-sex intercourse kinda fall apart if you just keep digging and you just keep asking "BUT WHY?"

Also – a side note – and I am going to rant here. I found out there are SIX DAMN PASSAGES that supposedly prohibit homosexuality in the bible. Six! The bible is fucking huge and yall are out here saying homosexuality is a sin when ACTUALLY MAYBE the fact that same-sex relations are mentioned so rarely is a hint that actually it isn't a big fucking deal? I don't know... food for thought.

And while I am ranting – Can we also please consider the CONTEXT in which the Bible was written? Because from what I read the fact that this book is thousands of years old and was written at a time so long ago that the entire world we live in would be foreign to them, does not matter. Just ignore that tiny little fact. And I can take a big fat guess as to why church leaders don't want us asking questions and don't want us taking things in context. Go ahead and ask one of those mega-pastors how much money they themselves are making from tithing. Ask yourself how church teachings work to keep everyone in their place, with a strict social order, and ponder how your place is decidedly not one of power. But who is in power? Hmmmm.... That isn't by accident.



Ya know, this is another tangent, but I originally wrote this thinking that I was going to try and be very respectful of religion. I am Black with grandparents in the South, I know the importance of the church and the ways it CAN foster community, joy, hope, and belonging. I myself went to church until I was 10, I know the good a church can do. But something I know more about is how religion is used to justify war, rape, and oppression. And that it has done irreparable damage to countless women and children (and men!), and I just can't get down with that. So yea, my anger is probably going to come through at times. I am angry for every single person who felt they were bad for wanting sex and that they were committing a sin just for the natural and healthy exploration of their bodies. I am angry for every single woman who, when trying to report abuse by her husband to church elders, was told to just pray and submit more. I am angry for every little boy who was told the only right way to be a man was to stifle every emotion except anger. And I am angry for every single person who was taught that their beautiful and glorious God hated them just because they had sex before marriage.

Ok, now that I have spent a million years just kinda talking about how we got here, should we actually like... talk about what the Bible says about homosexuality?

PART 2

SEXUALITY IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME



Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome

I knew I needed to start this conversation by talking about just how different attitudes and beliefs about sex were in Greek and Roman cultures. It took me a little bit to figure out exactly how summarize their beliefs around sex, because it really is quite different from how we view things now. And as you will see it is not something that can be quickly and easily explained, it is that different from current views. But I did find one quote that helped me understand better and feel like I had a better grasp at explaining it. In ancient Greece and Rome, "sex was something you did to someone, not something you had with someone." (2)

For the ancient Greeks and Romans, sex was about dominance and penetration, and there is always a dominant and a passive partner. It wasn't the sex or gender of your partners that mattered, but their social status and the role you both took in the sex act. It was a core belief that sex acts should never occur between two equals (who are definitely men because women are rarely mentioned because obviously women don't care about sex and don't have sexual desire *eye roll*).

It was also kind of generally accepted that anyone would and could have sex with anyone, and because of that, it was imperative that everyone practice self-control (well, everyone except those in the ruling class. The ruling class could basically do as they wanted). And there were quite a few well-known and accepted forms of same-sex intercourse – prostitution, master/slave, and pederasty.

Ah pederasty. I am guessing you can take a bit of a guess what it means, given the root "pedo," but let me explain. Ancient Greece and Rome had this fun tradition where older men would act as young boys' patrons, and would provide education, socialization, and basically just show the young boy how to be a man. Sex in this relationship was perfectly acceptable due to the unequal status between the young boys and their patrons– and there were rules about how long the relationships could last. As the boy gets older and reaches closer social status to the elder, the relationship needs to end. It was also believed that sperm basically carried masculinity, and so it was a regular and accepted practice for men to have sex with young boys to transfer that masculinity and power into them. It was also believed that releasing too much semen would lead to a loss of vigor, mental acuity and masculinity. So, you gotta conserve that shit.



Fun fact – given their limited knowledge of reproduction, and the pervasive patriarchy, it was assumed that sperm held everything you needed to make a baby, and the woman was just an empty vessel that grew the baby. Her body had nothing to do with it and all she contributed was the right soil to grow the baby. In those days, with their newly agrarian cultures, a lot of things came to be understood through the lens of crops and agriculture. So, just as with crops, where you drop the seed and the crop grows, it was thought that you spilled your seed (sperm, the almighty) inside a woman and a baby grew. It was the magical sperm that did all the work, fuck those ladies and their wombs. And this is why it is so bad to “spill your seed” outside of a vagina – it was thought you were wasting a baby.

Ok, back to the topic at hand. In ancient Rome and Greece, bisexuality or pansexuality seemed to be assumed – writings often refer to someone as having sex with man and woman, and as we saw above, there were quite a few socially sanctioned sex acts involving young boys. So gender was not what made a sex act acceptable or not. But the act of dominance and penetration was. And while most men could have sex with anyone, it was understood that their main partner would be a woman, as sex was needed for procreation.

And here is where I cannot understate enough just how little women were valued in these times. It was not just that they were seen as subordinates, they were seen as having lesser value, lesser personhood. Fucking Philo, this philosopher, theologian dude, who I will probably talk about again because I have a bone to pick with him and St. Augustine, wrote in the 4th century, about men who have sex with men: “the men became accustomed to be treated like women, and in this way engendered among themselves the disease of females.” (7) THE DISEASE!!!! OF FEMALES!!! We get it dude you hate women.

But this view of women as not just less than, but as basically a fucking disease, gets at the root of ancient beliefs about sex. As I have said it was all about dominance and penetration – namely who was doing the penetrating (the dominant role) and who was being penetrated (the passive role). And you guessed it, because basically only men could do the penetrating, that was seen as the strong, virile, and approved act, but those damn women were weak and passive, and it is just gross if you “take her place” and act in the passive role. Remember – sex was not something you had with someone; it was something you DID to someone. So it should come as no surprise that while sex between men was generally actually accepted, the men who took the “passive” role were seen as weak or effeminate.



This is something I find really interesting and my brain kind of has some difficulty wrapping itself around – generally, sex involves two or more people, so if a man is having penetrative sex, another person is kind of an integral part of the whole thing, the man's penis has to go somewhere. So why would there be so much stigma around being the “passive” partner, when generally same-sex behaviors were accepted? And the answer lies in... MISOGYNY AND PATRIARCHY WHOOOOO. I can dominate you and that's cool, but you are a sucker if you like it and want it. Because again, sex was something you did to someone, not something you had with someone.

It all comes down to the fact that to these men, “sex” meant sticking your dick into something and dominating it. And since often the person they were dominating was a woman, and women were pretty much subhuman, whoever takes on that role is less valued. Men were said to “take it like a woman” (*muliebria pati*, “to undergo womanly things”) when they were anally penetrated, and this put them in the “lower rank of a woman.” (7).

SO! That is my long-winded way of saying that Greek and Roman attitudes around sex, sexuality, and what was socially acceptable pretty much in no way resemble how we think about sex, sexuality, and acceptable sexual behaviors today. And as we think about the bible, and what it says about same-sex intercourse, we must remember that culturally homosexual behavior had been acceptable in many ways, but also maybe not in ways we would sanction today.

Let's start actually taking a look at the six passages, shall we? As I mentioned above, there are only a handful of passages (generally referred to as the Clobber Passages or the Clobber Verses) that actually discuss same-sex behaviors or intercourse. In fact, “of the 35,527 verses in the Catholic Bible, only seven – 0.02% – are sometimes interpreted as prohibiting homosexual acts.” (5) And, when you take a good look at most of them, it's truly not hard to see how they are actually discussing the prohibition of excess, or a prohibition against exploitative sex and the use of sexual violence, not a prohibition of same-sex intercourse. Now, do I agree with this whole “limiting excess” thing? Hell no! But this was a time of stoicism and the stoics really loved to deprive themselves of all things pleasurable. It's annoying.

PART 3

THE 6 PASSAGES



Genesis 19: Sodom and Gomorrah

Now I know that many churches have publicly and loudly renounced the teaching that the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah names same-sex intercourse as a sin, but I still want to go in on it. Mainly because, as someone who has never read the bible and was not raised in a church, the more I read about this, the more fascinated I became. I think it is one of the starkest examples of the ways the bible can be manipulated towards exclusion, when from an outside perspective, it seems that most biblical texts actually lean towards love and inclusion. And while reading the story I was generally like “what the fuck, the bible is fucking WILD,” I was fascinated by the fact that for so long this passage was used to denounce homosexuality, when from an outside eye it is so clearly about the sins of sexual exploitation and humiliation, the evils of hoarding wealth, and the importance of hospitality.

Another reason why I wanted to go deep on Sodom and Gomorrah (pun very much intended) is because I actually wasn’t that familiar with the story, other than that I had heard it used to justify being a homophobe. And reading it, and getting a much deeper sense of the story, I was even more taken aback at how this story had been so wildly manipulated. While I want to be respectful and not assume ill will, I do think we should also be considering the real life context in which these verses were written.

Alright, Sodom and Gomorrah, where do we start. Let’s also remember I am no biblical scholar; I am not a person who goes to church, nor will I ever be. I am just a girl who finds religion to be fascinating and is always trying to go deeper and learn her histories. I believe we have a better chance of changing hearts and minds if we come at a subject with thoughtfulness and compassion, and that you always catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. You can thank my very Southern grandmother for that.

My very brief and very Atheist summary of Sodom and Gomorrah goes a little something like this.

Abraham and Sarah are chilling when God and two angels (in the form of men) appear before them, and so Abraham and Sarah invite them into the house, make them some bread and a really good meal and treat their guests with the utmost hospitality. While there, God tells Abraham of his plan to destroy the city of Sodom, as their sins were so grievous. Abraham asks God if he will spare the city if Abraham can find 50 righteous people. God says, “Bet. If you even find TEN righteous people, I won’t destroy the city.”



The two angels then arrive in Sodom, still in the form of men, and are greeted by Lot who shows similar hospitality as Abraham and Sarah. Lot insists the angels seek refuge in his home, where he cooks them a spectacular meal. It is important to note that Lot was a foreigner of the city, having just arrived in Sodom himself. He was not of the city.

This is when the real shit starts – all of the men who WERE from the city, surround the house and call out to Lot, demanding Lot bring his guests out so the men of the city can have sex with them. Lot refuses and offers up his daughter stating he will not give up the men as they are guests under his roof (This is where my brain goes “wait – so a man having sex with another man is a sin, but a father offering his daughter up for rape is perfectly fine. OK, sure! Why not.”) There is some language here I want to highlight, as it becomes more pertinent as we deconstruct the narrative later. When Lot refuses, the men threaten Lot, stating that if Lot does not give up his guests, then the mob of men outside will “treat you worse than them.” It is very clear here that the men of the city are looking for sex as a means of violence, not sex as a means of connection. And these men are not happy that a foreigner, Lot, is keeping them from their goods. As Lot continues to refuse, the men try to break down the doors and are stuck blind by the angels, ending the attack. Lot and co flee the city, God destroys it with fire and brimstone, the end.

And so, somehow, rather than being about the attempted GANG RAPE of angels, and the sin of inhospitality, this passage somehow came to be seen as a warning against same-sex behavior. WHAT? Y’all this shit is about gang rape, it’s not being gay, and yet somehow some dudes were like “Go ahead and offer up your daughter for rape, that’s cool, but those dudes wanted to fuck a guy that’s a sin!” The men’s violent treatment of strangers is being compared to the hospitality of Abraham, Sarah, and Lot and the story is condemning the VIOLENCE not the sex act. There’s also this whole part about wealth-hoarding but that’s a little outside of what I am talking about here. And I repeat, are we ever gonna talk about how the solution to the angry mob at the door was to have Lot’s daughter be raped? I have SO MANY questions! And to be honest, I should maybe actually look further into that... But I can’t get distracted right now.



To really drive the point home, there is a parallel story in Judges 19, that is even more disturbing and violent than Sodom and Gomorrah. A Levite is traveling with his concubine, and they stop in the town of Gibeah and are taken in by an old man (hotels didn't exist y'all, travelers had to rely on the hospitality of people. If no one took them in, then they were left to sleep in the town square and risk thieves and worse.) The old man shows them hospitality, providing food and drink and even food for their donkeys. And again, just like in S&D, some dudes from the city show up and demand the old man "bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him." And the old man says no, and just like Lot he offers up his virgin daughter and the female concubine. "I'll bring them to you now and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don't do such an outrageous thing." The concubine is sent out and I would rather not describe further, I will just say the men of the city carried out their violence. And again I scream "But the fact that these men first came by and said they were gonna have sex with the man is the real problem. Rape and murder, fine. Sex with another man? Sin!" What??? I'm sorry I try to be respectful, but this is where I just get frustrated at how these passages have been used to justify the horrific treatment of queer people. Like how did we come to see this as a story against same-sex behaviors??? The stories are horrific and it's pretty clear that the true sin was violence. So shouldn't we see this as a story against the use of sexual violence??? I don't know I am just rambling now because WOW.

Nothing in either of these stories has to do with consensual same sex relationships. It is clear to me that the men were there to cause violence, and the story is about the sin of inhospitality, NOT the supposed sin of homosexuality. It is also important to remember the role of hospitality when these passages were being written and translated. In a world with no inns or hotels, travelers were dependent and vulnerable, and travel was dangerous without the hospitality of strangers. In both stories, foreigners come into a wicked city and offer hospitality to other strangers and are then retaliated against for their acts of hospitality. The hospitable acts of these foreigners are contrasted by the blood lust of the men of the city. To view this as a story about the ills of homosexuality is frankly lazy and uncritical, but also, wow, what a way to retrofit your homophobic narrative. It would almost be impressive if it wasn't so fucking diabolical.



ROMANS 1:26-27

"Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."

"Men committed indecent acts with men" – which I have also seen translated as "men committed shameless acts with men" – is one of those supposedly damning verses that obviously prohibits two men sleeping together. But if we look at it closely, what does it actually say? Indecent acts, shameless acts. It doesn't say "men do not put your penis into another man for that is horrible." So why exactly has this verse continually been cited as evidence that homosexuality is wrong? I would argue that it is to further retrofit a narrative of exclusion where none used to exist. If we think about the context of the times, same-sex intercourse was actually acceptable in many cases. So we also have to look at the rest of the story. It states the men were "inflamed with lust" and in that lust, they committed shameful acts. It seems the sin here is lust, not the mysterious shameful act that is never actually clearly defined.

There is some additional evidence that this verse could be about the condemnation of excess as opposed to moderation. Some LGBTQ-affirming biblical scholars have argued that the use of the phrase "abandoned natural relations" also fits in with the narrative. There is an idea that during ancient times, when sexuality wasn't really defined by genders, it was assumed that all men would and could sleep with women. And so in fits of lust, men have been so unable to consume their sexual desires with women alone, that they even start sleeping with men. The thing that matters here is that the men are sleeping with other men only out of an excess of lust, not due a genuine attraction. Again, this is one of those concepts that my brain kind of took a minute to conceptualize and explain but it makes sense. So much of the bible is about the prohibition of excess, this verse is basically saying like... be intentional in who you sleep with, don't just fuck around because you cannot find any other way to satisfy your appetite.

Putting all of this together, it becomes a lot easier to see this verse as being about controlling yourself and the sins of excess. Maybe the moral lesson here has more to do with the virtues of moderation (ugh) and not so much to do with same-sex intercourse.



LEVITICUS 18:22

"Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable."

Alright moving on to our friend Leviticus! I have to admit I had heard of this verse before, when doing random reading on whatever fuckery another church has gotten up to, but didn't know much about what it said or was really about.

So if you are like me and don't know the full context of this sentence, let's take a look. The Leviticus verses are part of the Holiness code. This code was meant to dictate how Israelites would differentiate themselves, as they were the chosen people. The code was meant to represent the uniqueness of Israelites and further disassociate them from their neighbors. (Ok this isn't in line with my whole "inclusion" argument, but as I said, I am not a biblical scholar! Just a girl with thoughts and books.) Leviticus generally includes a long list of sexual prohibitions, of which "do not lie with a man as a with a woman" is one. And so of course this verse is loudly and boldly used to condemn homosexuality.

But of course, it is much more complicated than that. There has been some debate over the use of the term "abomination." In Hebrew, the word that gets translated as abomination is toevah. Toevah does not connote something innately immoral as we understand abomination to mean; rather, toevah is "something that makes a person ritually unclean." So it may be more accurate to say "don't sleep with a man, that is taboo." Which... maybe. But again, thinking of the times, it was taboo to sleep with another man of equal status. Because sex was about dominance and penetration, and two men of equal status could not possibly both maintain their dominance in such a situation.

An interesting angle that I have seen that refutes the assertion that Leviticus prohibits same-sex intercourse, also takes into account the population of Israelites at the time and how crucial it would have been to grow the number of Israelites for the survival of Israel. And remembering thoughts of the time that semen was the life force, and so it should not be wasted, some of these prohibitions could be in place to help ensure that sex is procreative and helps ensure the future of Israel.

So basically, this seemingly very straightforward argument kinda loses steam when you take into account the context of the times, what the verse was about, and general thoughts around the need to conserve sperm for procreation. Once again, an anti-LGBTQ stance was retrofitted to fit a particular narrative.



MATTHEW 19:3-6

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Ahhhhh one flesh. I had heard this phrase before and vaguely knew it had been used as an argument against same sex marriage and homosexuality. Basically, some people like to say that in response to the question about a man divorcing his wife, Jesus responds by affirming that God created man and woman and that this distinction is needed for marriage. But what if we looked at this conversation a little closer. What if we said that in response to a question about divorce, Jesus answers by highlighting the permanence of marriage. And because the person asking the question specifically mentioned a man divorcing his wife, Jesus responded back using their same language. The question as it was asked was specific to man and wife, but that does not necessarily mean that by repeating that wording back, Jesus is codifying the decree that sex must be between man and a woman. He only repeats those words because the question as it was asked referred to man and woman. The actual lesson lies within the core principle of the response, which is that marriage is a covenant with one's spouse that reflects God's covenant with humans through Christ, and therefore should not be broken.

There has also been debate over the translation of the use of the phrase "one flesh." Many have taken it to mean that man and woman come together through the act of penetration and become one flesh. But at various point throughout the bible "flesh" is used to describe general kinship ties. So maybe the focus of coming together as one flesh was about coming together to form a familial bond. Coming together as one flesh does not have to be about the physical act of penetration, it can be about the connection and intimacy of coming together in a committed relationship.



Many also argue that this verse speaks to the importance of commitment, and committing not just your body, but your whole being to your partner, and have sex remain within the confines of marriage. Look do I agree that sex should only take place within marriage or within a committed, monogamous relationship? No, of course I don't. But I do believe in the importance of intentionality when it comes to sex. Sure go ahead and have a one night stand with someone who's name you don't even bother to learn. But when you are together, and you are having sex, be in the moment with that person and honor their body just as much as you honor yours. Be attentive and intentional and come together in a way that is pleasurable for both. Create that intimate connection for one night or one hour or 15 minutes or whatever, and then kick em out and never see them again! Just don't forget that they are more than just a body, they are a person.



1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10 and Timothy 1:10

Corinthians: "Know ye that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of god? Be not deceived neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate (malakoi), nor abusers of themselves with mankind (arsenokoitai), nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of god."

Timothy: "The law is for people who are sexually immoral, or who practice homosexuality (arsenokoitai), or are slave traders, liars, promise breakers, or who do anything else that contradicts the wholesome teaching."

These verses are such a beast, and rely so heavily on translation and context, that I am fully planning an additional blog post just to break it down (there is an entire documentary just on the translation mistakes alone, it was also instrumental in hurling me down this rabbit hole). You will notice I have highlighted a few phrases above, because the entire argument that these verses prohibit same-sex behaviors and homosexuality rely on how we translate the specific words malakoi and arsenokoitai.

Before we jump into the briefest of overviews regarding the translation of these words, I want to highlight two of the other translations I have found for 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

"Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor boy prostitutes (malakoi) nor sodomites (arsenokoitai) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God."

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (malakoi) nor homosexual offenders (arsenokoitai) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

For those paying attention, you will note that all 3 versions translate the words arsenokoitai and malakos differently. Arsenokoitai has been said to mean "abusers of themselves with mankind," "sodomites," and "homosexual offenders." Malakoi has been translated variously as "effeminate," "boy prostitutes," and "male prostitutes." Let's dive a little deeper into why it seems no one can fully agree on the correct translation.



Let's start with malakos (the singular of malakoi). A commonly used word, literally translating as "soft," it also connotes someone who is weak, lazy, or lacks self control. As such, it has long been translated as "effeminate" instead of "soft" (because obviously someone who is effeminate would be so soft of character and morals as to lack self control). It was also sometimes used as an insult to call men out for their laziness. It is important to note that most uses of the word were not sexual in nature. It has also been translated as "weaklings," "wantons," "debauchers," and "licentious."

Arsenokoitai (plural of arsenokoites) on the other hand was used very rarely in ancient Greek writing, and it is possible that its use in this passage may have been the first time it was written. Arsenokoitai is a compound word – arsen = male, koites = bed. So many argue that the word arsenokoites means "male bed," i.e. men who sleep with men. It's a bit of a leap as to how they get there, we do not need to get into the details. However, we must note that these translators seem to rely a little too much on a literal definition of the compound word. Think of the word "understand." It is a compound word using "under" and "stand", but it doesn't translate as "something is under a stand." So it is possible that "male bed" has a completely different meaning unrelated to men in a bed

Further translation work found the words arsenokoitai or arsenokoites used only a handful of times (IN ALL ANCIENT GREEK WRITING, not just in the bible), generally when discussing economic exploitation. I will spare you the nitty gritty of the translation work, but taking context clues from these other references, the word most likely should be understood to mean forms of sexual-economic exploitation. This translation makes even more sense when you think of where the word is positioned in the lists above – in Corinthians it follows "sexually immoral" and "adulterers" and is before "thieves" and "greedy." In Timothy it appears after "sexually immoral" and before "slave traders." So the translation as more generally meaning "sexual-economic exploitation" would make sense when you consider the progression of crimes in both Corinthians and Timothy – from sexually immoral, to those who exploit people through sex for economic gain, to those who exploit people through slavery for economic gain. A cascade of sins if you will.



Whew. Ok. We got through the very general translation work (let me tell you, it is so much more complicated and deeper than what I wrote above), but what does it mean and what does it have to do with homosexuality? Well you will notice, two of the above translations for arsenokoitai were “[those who] practice homosexuality” and “homosexual offenders.” There are also versions of the bible that combine malakoi and arsenokoitai to mean “homosexual.” So many church teachings will now point to this verse and say “Look! The bible specifically prohibits “homosexuality! It is written write there in Corinthians and Timothy! Homosexual offenders shall not inherit the kingdom of God!” But when we look deeper, as we did above and will even more in a later piece, their entire argument basically rests on a translation error that led to the word homosexual being included in the Bible. Again this verse is about the use of sex as violence, and prohibits exploitative sex, it kind of actually says nothing about same-sex intercourse. A homophobic narrative was retrofit where none previously existed.

PART 4

WHAT DOES IT
ALL MEAN?



Sabrina's Final Thoughts

I can't lie, part of me kind of is like "what DOES this all mean, why the hell did you spend so much time writing and researching this?" What's the point exactly? And I think the answer is two-fold. Possibly three-fold, let's see.

I wanted to highlight these passages and walk through them carefully because I know the power of the bible. I may not believe in it, but it is a sacred text that for many forms their entire belief system, so I think it is important to know what it actually says. And now when you hear someone using one of these verses to justify their homophobia, you can ask them if they have thought about the context and the translations. I think it is often forgotten that these books were written in languages that really don't exist anymore, in a culture that was so different from ours that I would argue it does not make sense to hold ourselves to the same moral code.

I also wanted to highlight the process of examining the moral messages we received growing up and maybe haven't spent much time thinking through. Not just those beliefs that are rooted in religion, but cultural beliefs as well. Take some time to actually examine your belief system. I love thinking about my own thoughts and thought processes and I probably spend too much time in my head. But I enjoy it and I think it is important. Where did your beliefs come from and who taught them to you? And who taught them their beliefs? So often we are just told what to think and don't even realize there's another way of looking at it. We trust whoever told us, and so we forget to check in with ourselves and question "hmmm, but does that actually fit with the morals and values that I have and want for myself?"

But most importantly I wanted to write this to honor every single person who was made to feel that they themselves are a sin simply for the way they were born. For every single person who spent a lifetime disconnected from their body for fear of damnation. For every single person who was not just told that their sexuality was a sin, but that they themselves are a sinner. You deserve to revel in pleasure, in your body and in your God. I may be an Atheist and I may have my issues with the bible, but I want anyone who loves it to be able to find comfort and solace in the page, rather than fear and disconnect. I've read a lot about the pain these verses have caused people, and I hope this little journey we went down can help heal the pain for at least a few of you.



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