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DOES THE LEVITICAL PROHIBITION OF HOMOSEXUALITY STILL APPLY TODAY?

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When I first began studying the issue of homosexuality in depth, I had little confidence the Levitical prohibition still applied today. After all, wasn't Leviticus written more than three thousand years ago to the Hebrew people under the Mosaic Law? And isn't Leviticus full of other prohibitions we ignore, such as sowing a field with two kinds of seeds, or wearing a garment of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19)?

Yet as I have probed further into the biblical view of sexuality, and in particular the passages that deal with homosexuality, I have become convinced that the biblical prohibition against homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22 is still binding today. In fact, it is an important passage in the Old Testament that indicates God's condemnation of all forms of homosexual behavior.

THE MEANING OF LEVITICUS 18:22

Leviticus 18:22 says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."¹ Some critics suggest the meaning of this passage is ambiguous. For instance, K. Renato Lings suggests the prohibition may involve male-male incest.² Jerome Walsh argues that Leviticus 18:22 relates solely to a specific scenario involving anal inter course between two men, one of whom is a free adult Israelite.³

Confusion over the meaning of this passage rests partly on the translation of *zākār*. Various English translations render *zākār* as "man," "mankind," or "male." Yet "man" and "mankind" miss the wider meaning of the passage. According to Near Eastern studies professor Donald J. Wold, "There is no ambiguity in the term *zākār*; it

always refers to the male gender.”⁴ Zākār is a general term that encompasses all males. In Leviticus 18:22, the male gender is contrasted with the female gender (nēqēbâ), as seen in Genesis 1:26–27, which indicates gender is part of the order of creation. Wold elucidates the key point: “The legislator could have expanded upon this term to prohibit sexual intercourse between specific categories of males (e.g., between boys, between adult males and boys, between adult males, between boys and old men, between adult males and old men), since Hebrew words existed for these various categories of individuals within the male species. *But it would have been unnecessary because the term zākār in Leviticus 18:22 excludes all male[-male] sexual relations*”⁵ (emphasis added).

Revisionist scholars often argue that biblical prohibitions no longer apply to the kinds of same-sex relations that exist today. It is true that homosexuality is generally practiced differently today than in the ancient near east (ANE). But this point is irrelevant, since a proper translation of zākār makes it clear that male–male sexual relations are rejected in toto.

Homosexual relations in the ANE were often between social unequals, such as a slave and master, or a man and boy. Other prohibitions specifically targeted same-sex *rape*. But the focus of Leviticus 18:22 is not so constricted. Old Testament professor Richard Davidson concludes, “Unlike other ANE laws relating to homosexual activity, *both* parties here are penalized, thus clearly implying consensual male-male intercourse not just a case of homosexual rape.”⁶ In sum, Leviticus 18:22 condemns all homosexual acts between members of the male gender—period.

Lesbianism

Why isn’t female–female sex mentioned in Leviticus? We must remember that the ANE was a patriarchal culture, and Leviticus—as other ancient documents—was addressed to men. For a variety of reasons, lesbianism may not have been as significant of an issue. Nevertheless, it does not follow from the lack of reference that lesbianism is permissible. In fact, if the arguments below succeed, this passage would still *indirectly* condemn lesbian sex.

DOES LEVITICUS 18:22 APPLY TODAY?

Leviticus 18 is part of the Holiness Code (chap. 17–26). This section of Leviticus is concerned with laws, sacrifices, and purity regulations for the Hebrew people to be separate from the surrounding ungodly nations.

Leviticus 18 is a distinct unit within the Holiness Code. The chapter begins and ends with a similar warning. Leviticus 18:3–5 says, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall

therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: *I am the LORD.*” Then the chapter ends with a similar enunciation: “So keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, and never to make yourselves unclean by them: *I am the LORD your God*” (v. 30).

Professor Wold provides four supporting reasons for seeing Leviticus 18 as an independent unit within the larger Holiness Code: “(a) the sexual nature of all the crimes listed, (b) the position of the curse at the end of the chapter so as to encompass the entire series, (c) the position of the statement *I am the Lord your God* at the beginning and end of the chapter, and (d) the rationale of impurity for all the crimes.”⁷

Leviticus 18 has the following structure:

- vv. 1–5: Commandment to follow God rather than patterns in Egypt and Canaan
- vv. 6–18: Prohibition of incest
- v. 19: Prohibition of sex with a menstruating woman
- v. 20: Prohibition against adultery
- v. 21: Prohibition of offering children as a sacrifice to Molech
- v. 22: Prohibition of male–male sex
- v. 23: Prohibition of bestiality
- vv. 24–30: Warning not to commit these same “abominations” as those in the land who God is driving out on account of their sins

Close analysis reveals that the warnings not to commit the sins of the people in the land (vv. 1–5, 24–30) frame the entire chapter. Israel is to avoid the evil practices of pagan nations who were “vomited” from the land because of their iniquity (v. 25). God warns the Hebrew people that they too will be “vomited” if they commit the same abominations.

Universal Prohibition versus Purity Practices for Israel

The fact that God threatened to judge pagan nations *and* Israel for committing the sins listed in Leviticus 18 is the first key to its wider application. Michael Brown explains: “The Bible tells us—just to give one example—that God judged Israel for eating unclean animals, but the Bible never tells us that God judged the nations of the world for eating unclean animals. Why? Because it was not intrinsically sinful to eat a pig rather than a cow (although in the ancient world, in particular, it might have been a lot more unhealthy to eat a pig), but it was intrinsically sinful to commit other sins, such as murdering another human being.”⁸

In other words, there were certain laws uniquely for Israel and others that apply universally. How do we know the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 are universal? Simple: God judged other nations for disobeying them. As Dr. Brown notes, God never judges other nations for sowing two kinds of seed in the same field or for wearing garments

with mixed fabric. But God threatens to judge the people in Canaan for committing the sins in Leviticus 18, including male–male sexual behavior. Brown concludes, “*And if it was a sin for idol-worshipping Egyptians and Canaanites back then, you’d better believe it is a sin for God’s holy and chosen people today*”⁹ (emphasis in original).

The second key is the implication that Leviticus 18 is contrary to nature. The commandment, “You shall not lie with a male (zākār) as with a woman,” reflects the creation account in Genesis 1:26–27 (“male and female he created them”). In his commentary on Leviticus, Nobuyoshi Kiuchi lists four reasons that the Genesis creation/fall account lies behind Leviticus 18. First, obeying the command allows man to *live* (Lev. 18:5), which echoes the proclamation that disobedience would lead to death (Gen. 2:17). Second, the forbidden sexual unions violate the “one-flesh” union of Genesis 2:24. Third, the prohibitions highlight the created order by emphasizing the difference between man and woman, and humans and beasts. Fourth, the driving out of the pagans from the land may parallel the expulsion of the first couple from Eden. Kiuchi concludes, “Thus, vv. 6–23 singularly aim to restore the original created order upon the premise that humanity is fallen. They assume fallen humanity is liable to take the course of action represented by the abominations listed.”¹⁰

The third key that the Levitical position on homosexual behavior still applies is that the New Testament also repeats the prohibition against homosexual behavior (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; 1 Tim. 1:8–10). There is not a single passage in the Old or New Testaments that positively portrays homosexual behavior of any sort.

In sum, the Levitical prohibition against male–male sex applied to Israel *and* foreign nations in the Old Testament, reflects the Genesis creation account, and is repeated as binding in the New Testament. Homosexual sex is universally wrong.

Cult Prostitution?

In *Torn*, Justin Lee discounts the modern application of Leviticus 18:22 because of its association with cult prostitution.¹¹ This common position, however, has three primary flaws. First, as noted, the Hebrew word zākār indicates all male–male sex is condemned regardless of the context. Second, Leviticus 18 also condemns adultery, child sacrifice, and prostitution, which are wrong independent of their tie to cult prostitution. Some critics point out that the passage dealing with homosexuality follows the prohibition against sacrificing children to Molech, and thus it is tied to cult prostitution. But this argument fails because in Leviticus 20:14–16 the prohibition on homosexuality is couched between incest and bestiality. Third, when biblical writers want to prohibit cult prostitution, they do so clearly (e.g., Deut. 23:17).

What about Menstruation?

If the practices mentioned in Leviticus 18 are universally wrong, then what about having sex with a menstruating woman (v. 19)? Scholars differ on the continued

application of this statute. Robert Gagnon sees the inapplicability of this law today as a unique exception.¹² Pastor Kevin DeYoung also believes this statute is not binding and points to the term “menstrual uncleanness” (v. 19) as an indication that ritual impurity was in view, not moral impurity.¹³

In contrast, some scholars believe the prohibition remains applicable. R. K. Harrison notes that sex with a menstruating woman in this passage is considered a moral offense and penalized accordingly.¹⁴ There are many societies with pollution concepts in which a menstruous woman is to be avoided.¹⁵ Some cite the importance of the man being sensitive to the wife’s emotional state during menstruation. Other scholars cite health concerns for the woman,¹⁶ although this is a minority position.

Neither of these views necessarily undermines the universal scope of the prohibition against homosexuality. Scholars who adopt the view that the statute against having sex with a menstruating woman no longer applies reason that original readers of Leviticus would have recognized that blood was part of the ritual purity system of Israel (and possibly the broader ANE), and thus would have grasped its limited scope. This specific prohibition was included in Leviticus 18 because it fit the larger theme of sexual wrongdoings.

Scholars who adopt the view that the statute remains in effect recognize that the penalty for having sex with a menstruating woman differed from that for engaging in same-sex sexual behavior (e.g., Lev. 20:13, 18). And they note that the category of “unintentional” sins may apply if someone had sex with a menstruating woman without awareness it was wrong (Lev. 4). Either way, the question of the continuing applicability of this statute does not impact the universal prohibition against same-sex sexual behavior.

Many critics are quick to reject the Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality as antiquated. But this is unwarranted and premature. As noted, the prohibition is rooted in the Genesis narrative and thus homosexual behavior violates God’s creative norm. Further, the opening and closing verses in Leviticus 18 (vv. 1–5, 24–30) show God’s judgment of the Egyptians and Canaanites for committing these same “abominations.” Finally, the prohibition against homosexual sex is repeated as binding in the new covenant. While it may be politically incorrect to proclaim same-sex sexual behavior as sinful, this is the biblical pattern from Genesis, through Leviticus, and into the New Testament.

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NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
- 2 K. Renato Lings, "The 'Lyings' of a Woman: Male–Male Incest in Lev. 18:22?" *Theology and Sexuality* 15, 2 (2009): 231–50.
- 3 Jerome Walsh, "Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: Who Is Doing What to Whom?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, 2 (2001): 201–9.
- 4 Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order* (San Antonio: Cedar Leaf Press, 2009), 103.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 6 Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 149.
- 7 Wold, *Out of Order*, 98.
- 8 Michael Brown, *Can You Be Gay and Christian?* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma Media, 2014), 113.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 10 Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Apollos OT Commentary: Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 331.
- 11 Justin Lee, *Torn* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 177.
- 12 Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 113.
- 13 Kevin DeYoung, "A Sermon on Leviticus 18:1–30 (Part 1)," May 20, 2009: <http://bit.ly/1umEROD>.
- 14 R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 192.
- 15 Donald J. Wold mentions the Tamil peoples of India and the Nuer of Africa. See *Out of Order*, 108.
- 16 Richard Davidson cites studies that reveal a lower incidence of cervical cancer for women who refrain from sexual intercourse during menstruation. See *Flame of Yahweh*, 334.