

The Book of Leviticus

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

“If man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them commit an abomination; they must be put to death; their blood will be upon them” (Lev.20:13).

Where are the references to homosexuality in the Hebrew Scriptures?

References to homosexual behavior do not appear in Israel’s earlier “Covenant Code” (Exod.20:22 to 23:19) or “Deuteronomic Code” (Deut.12:1 to 26:15). Rather they occur only in the later “Holiness Code” (Lev.17:1 to 26:46), which is part of the priestly collection of religious laws for cultic purity.

The two allusions in the Code (Lev.18:22; Lev.20:13) are the sole items of legislation against same-sex activity. Interconnected and extremely brief, they concern only men, not women. No additional records exist, unlike the case of different sexual offenses, either of measures taken to enforce the prohibitions or of penalties ever actually inflicted.

As with all biblical materials, we need to examine the regulations within their own historical or cultural context regarding: (1) primitive views on homosexuality, (2) relationship to idolatry, (3) meaning of abomination, and (4) other Jewish prohibitions.

How does the book of Leviticus view homosexual orientation?

The phrase, “as with a woman,” which significantly appears in both verses, alerts us to ancient views on sexual orientation. The Hebrews could have had no idea of constitutional homosexuality or heterosexuality, which is a modern realization of the medical and behavioral sciences. They would have considered homosexual conduct as a deliberate perversion of heterosexual instincts.

The priestly tribe, in compiling the Levitical laws, thus condemned same-sex acts between men as though contrary to a given attraction to women. More importantly, the legislators adjudged such actions against the background of pagan cultic practices, which added the specific malice of idolatry or abomination.

Why is Leviticus opposed to homosexual acts?

The purpose of the same-sex prohibitions (Lev. 18:22; Lev.20:13), contained within a longer series of cultic regulations, is made clear at the beginning of each chapter (Lev. 18:3-5; Lev.20:7-8) and at the end of each chapter (Lev. 18:24- 30; Lev.20:22-26). The laws are principally directed against pagan customs, such as (homosexual) religious prostitution, routinely found among the Egyptians and Canaanites. The Israelites, as God’s chosen people, are not to defile themselves with similar sexual idolatry.

The priestly writers of Leviticus meant to intensify the distinctiveness of the Hebrew race, as a nation set apart from its foreign neighbors. The authors also wished to emphasize the holiness of the Jewish tribes, for whom the unclean, i.e., homosexual, rites of heathen countries were an abomination.

Primitive peoples lived in a world where a sense of worship permeated almost every aspect of their existence. Thus the pagans indulged in homosexual religious orgies as well as heterosexual fertility cults. They felt that all such activities became suffused with some sacred mystical quality supposedly relating the persons to their male and female gods. The Israelites condemned these ritualistic practices, such as “a man lying with a man,” as forms of detestable idolatry, by which the Gentiles worshipped their many false deities rather than the one true God.

According to commentators, the Hebrews in the Book of Leviticus also rejected adultery, incest, and bestiality, primarily as an assertion of Jewish differentness. However, such sexual behaviors remained under universal condemnation, because, unlike homosexual acts, all three were severely prohibited by further moral codes of the Bible for many additional reasons than Hebrew distinctiveness.

Isn't homosexuality called an abomination?

No. The Bible does not consider homosexuality in and of itself an abomination. Yet improper emphasis on this term in the Hebrew Scriptures has often magnified a personal phobia toward gay/lesbian people.

In fact, Sacred Scripture calls many things, besides pagan homosexual practices, abominable, hateful, loathsome, or detestable, depending on the English translation. Examples include the eating of sacrificial food after the second day (Lev.19:7) and the wearing of pants by a woman (Deut.22:5). The Bible even considers certain creatures abominable (Deut. 14:3); for example, camels, hares, shellfish, eagles, ostriches, gulls, storks, and more (Lev. 11:4-47; Deut.14:3- 18).

The main Hebrew word for abomination, transliterated as *toebah*, commonly signifies activities or objects ritually unclean, like eating pork, rather than inherently evil, like murdering someone or stealing property. The expression principally refers to practices that were either actually associated with or simply reminiscent of pagan cultic rites. The reference certainly cannot justify present-day mistreatment of lesbian/gay individuals, who, according to Carl Jung, are “endowed with a wealth of religious feelings” far removed from idolatry.

But still aren't homosexual acts condemned?

On the one hand, the Hebrew Scriptures likewise condemn, sometime with apparently equal severity, certain sexual activities that we no longer consider wrong. On the other hand, the same scriptures permit different sexual practices which we no longer deem acceptable.

For instance, marital relations during the menstrual period (Lev.18:19; Lev.20:18) are prohibited within the same chapters that forbid homosexual offenses (Lev. 18:22; Lev.20:13). Nudity is

judged reprehensible even in the presence of one's family. Celibacy as a state in life is thought abnormal. Yet polygamy and concubinage are regularly allowed among the Hebrews.

If people interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures with absolute literalness, they would not eat rabbit or ham (Lev.11:6-7), crabs, oysters, clams, shrimp, lobster (Lev.11:10-12), or any rare meats (Lev.17:10-14; Lev.19:26). They would neither cut their hair (Lev.19:27) nor wear fabrics of blended materials (Lev.19:19). Men would not clip their beards (Lev.19:27), and women would not don male attire (Deut.22:5).

Likewise every financier would observe the veto of lending money at interest (Lev.25:37). Farmers would crusade against the crossbreeding of cattle and would never plant two kinds of crop in a single field (Lev.19:19).

Finally, we would permit the slavery of different races (Lev.25:44-45) and the merciless slaughter of innocent citizens (Num.31:17; Deut.20:16-17). We would endorse the death penalty not only for adulterous persons (Lev.20:10) but also for Sabbath workers (Num.15:32-36) and even for stubborn or rebellious children (Deut.21:18-21).

What can we conclude about the Levitical laws?

Obviously, individuals must never rashly lift prohibitions from the Hebrew Scriptures out of their specific cultural context and historical circumstances. Many of the laws are particular expressions of primitive concerns rather than absolute principles of biblical morality.

Fundamentalists, who insist on following ancient Judaic regulations, unfortunately often become selective and inconsistent in their choice of scriptural references. They completely ignore some verses, which seem archaic and embarrassing, and relentlessly quote other passages, particularly about homosexuality, which reinforce the ignorance and prejudice of society.

The Catholic Church, unlike some leaders and members of the conservative right, no longer approves the Hebrew death sentence for same-sex offenses. Vatican Congregations avoided any citation from the Book of Leviticus in the *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (1975) and *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (1983) as well as in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994/1997). As a concerned Christian community, we do not consider homosexuality a damnable abomination but rather a God-given context for living the Law of love.

“There is an unusual tendency to interpret strictly those few texts where homosexual acts are condemned, whereas Scripture itself is used more flexibly in other areas” (Dutch Bishops, Homosexual People in Society, p.15, 1979).

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