

THE LATINO/LATINA ROUNDTABLE PROJECT

of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry

Neither Judgment Nor Condemnation: Reading Again the Biblical Texts on Homosexuality



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This booklet is for you, for your family, and for your church.

The explanations that follow on how to interpret the Bible are taken from today's mainstream biblical scholars. The explanations and interpretations included in this booklet represent a strong consensus among biblical scholars across the world today.

In other words, the interpretations and explanations that we include here are the most reliable, accurate, and frequently cited among biblical scholars when it comes to understanding the biblical texts usually said to refer to homosexuality.

Let's begin with some basics.

1. **We have to avoid speaking in the singular. We should avoid thinking that there has only been *one* Christianity, *one* way of being Christian, *one* Christian response to homosexuality, or one way of understanding homosexuality among Christians.**¹
 - a. Throughout the twenty centuries of Christian history, the reactions to homosexuality have not always been the same.
 - b. From the reformations of the 16th century to today, the reactions of Christian denominations have not always been the same. In fact, there has been a great variety of responses to homosexuality among the churches throughout Christian history.
 - c. That's why we **cannot** say that Christianity (in the singular) has had this or that one reaction or response to homosexuality.
 - d. We must admit that, historically, there have been (and there still are) different ways of being Christian, and each one of these ways has had (historically) more than one reaction or response to homosexuality.
 - e. And we should also recognize that there is not only one Christian way of understanding homosexuality.

¹ In these pages we will understand as "Christian" anyone who self-identifies as a "follower of" or "believer in" Jesus Christ. "Christian" churches, therefore, are all: Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc.

f. No one person, and no one Christian denomination, has the monopoly on what it means to be Christian.

g. No one person, and no one Christian denomination, has the only possible Christian interpretation of homosexuality.

2. There are Christians who appeal to biblical texts in order to justify their judgment and condemnation of homosexuality and homosexuals. But *before* we allow that use of the biblical texts, we should admit the following:

a. No text in the Bible was written in English or in any modern language. All our modern Bibles are translations. That means:

i. The *translations* are not the Bible or parts of the Bible.

ii. Translations are attempts to recover for today (to the degree possible) the meanings that the original authors and their intended readers might have given the texts.

iii. Translations are also human attempts at understanding today what the texts might say to us.

iv. But as with any and all human efforts, therefore, every translation of the Bible is limited, not always correct and at times outright wrong, and subject to all the contexts and circumstances that affect any human effort.

b. All translations of the Bible were done by translators, who were (and are) part of *their* societies and cultures. Translators never stop being part of their society and culture when they are translating biblical texts.

c. That is why there has *never* been, and there can *never* be, any translator of the Bible who is not subject to the same prejudices, biases, limitations and cultural assumptions of *his/her* society and culture (and of *his/her* gender, sexual orientation, social class, race, etc.) whether the translator is aware of it or not. Because there has never existed a society or culture without prejudices and limitations (because there has never existed a perfect society or culture, or one not affected by sin) there can never be a translation of the Bible that does not reflect the prejudices, biases, and limitations of its translator and of his/her society.

d. All biblical texts were originally written in ancient languages. The Hebrew Bible (which Christians usually call the Old Testament) was written in classical or biblical Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Koiné Greek. But

none of these ancient languages is alive today—neither is spoken today anywhere in the world.² These ancient languages have been dead languages for many centuries. Among other things, this means that there is no one alive today who can tell the translators of the Bible, with absolute certainty, the exact meanings or uses of all the phrases, words, and idiomatic expressions, or of all customs and events, that were spoken or took place two or three thousand years ago.

- e. All biblical texts were written in and for cultures, contexts, circumstances, societies and times very different from ours.
 - i. All of the New Testament texts were written around 2,000 years ago. Different authors wrote them for different audiences in different places (today these places are called Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Greece and Italy).
 - ii. All of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was written around 2,200 to 3,000 years ago. Different authors wrote them in different places (today's Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Egypt).
- f. All translations of the Bible, therefore, are attempts at understanding and interpreting the meaning of what was written many centuries ago, in languages, circumstances, societies and cultures very different from our own.
- g. For a translation not to falsify the original meaning of the texts, it has to try reaching back into history, looking for what the original authors wanted to express in and through their texts-- but this is often very difficult.
- h. To reach into the past looking for the original meaning of ancient texts would require knowing about the past and about ancient peoples, languages and customs. But modern readers of the Bible often do not have this knowledge.
- i. What we **cannot** do, if we want to read the Bible honestly and without adulterating it, is to make its texts "fit" **our** preconceived notions of what their meaning must be. There are churches or persons today who say or believe that a biblical text means this or that, but that does not prove that the text actually meant what the church or person claims today. We first have to do our homework, and ask what is it that the text could have meant (or not) at the time, in the place and circumstances where it was written, and for the community that first read it.

² Modern Hebrew and modern Greek are not the same as their ancient predecessors. Just like modern English is not the same as the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic roots from which it historically derived.

i. Because a church or churchperson sincerely believes something is in the Bible, that is not enough to prove or claim that it is, or that it is the correct interpretation. We cannot forget that many churches in the past thought that slavery was morally right and that it was justified by many biblical texts—and yet all of these churches were horribly wrong.

ii. If we believe that the Bible is inspired by God, then we should **respect what the Bible says** (and not try to force on the Bible other meanings or interpretations that **we** want to find in it—meanings that the biblical texts did not or could not have).

j. Although no one today can guarantee to us that we have complete and exact access to all the original authors intended to say through their texts, we can study the authors' history, languages, and contexts. We can learn from respected and highly qualified **mainstream** scholars of the Bible. There is no guarantee that mistakes will not be made, but if we don't do the hard work (or learn from those who have really done it) it is almost certain that we'll adulterate the meaning of biblical texts. In this booklet we present to you the result of years of study and of learning from respected and qualified mainstream scholars of the Bible.

3. The following are the texts from the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) that are frequently used to condemn homosexuality.-

Genesis 19:1-11 (This is the story of the city of Sodom and of how its inhabitants are said to have abused two of Lot's guests in the city. The text is followed by God's destruction of the city because of its many sins.)

a. Today all of the best biblical interpreters, and all of the major Christian denominations, recognize that this text from the book of Genesis has nothing to do with homosexuality.

b. The sin and abuse committed by the citizens of Sodom was against hospitality. In the ancient Middle Eastern world, hospitality towards guests or towards complete strangers was a sacred obligation.

c. No author of the Old Testament, and no author of the New Testament, ever interprets this text from Genesis 19 as referring to homosexuality (and, therefore, no author in the entire Bible sees this text as condemning homosexuality).

d. It was **only after** the 11th century (after Christ) that this text begins to be used directly in reference to homosexuality and in order to justify condemning it—more than 1,500 years after it was written! The reasons for this sudden and

unfounded interpretation, however, have been historically proven to have been completely political and ideological.

- e. In other words, this text in Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom) **says nothing** about homosexuality.

I Kings 14:24. “There were also effeminate men in the land who imitated all the abominable practice of the nations that the Lord cleared out of the Israelites’ way.”

- a. This text, more accurately translated in many contemporary versions of the Bible, speaks of the reign of Rehoboam, king of Judah. Rehoboam was such a bad ruler that Israel split into two separate kingdoms as a consequence of his bullying incompetence.
- b. This section of the First Book of Kings (where this verse is found) strongly criticizes Rehoboam for his bad government and for having provoked the division of Israel.
- c. As part of its attack on Rehoboam, this section of I Kings lists the sins that appeared among the Israelites during (and because of) the reign of Rehoboam. Verse 24 (the one quoted here) appears at the end of the list.
- d. Before the Israelites arrived in what eventually became their land, other peoples had settled there. These peoples practiced what was called “sacred prostitution” (also called “ritual prostitution”). This was part of their religion. They believed that if they had sexual relations with male or female “sacred” prostitutes (who were like priests and priestesses of their gods), as part of worship rituals in the temples, the gods would contribute to the wellbeing of the people.
- e. “Ritual prostitution” involved men and women as prostitutes. Most of the time the persons who were prostitutes in these temple rituals were heterosexual, even when sometimes the ritual included same-sex acts.
- f. The ancient Hebrew word used by the text to refer to the male prostitutes did not mean or imply “effeminate.” Therefore, it is incorrect to translate this verse as referring to men who are “effeminate” because that is not the meaning of the term; it simply meant “male prostitute” (and we now know from historical studies that the vast majority of these male “ritual prostitutes” were heterosexual).
- g. The “abominations” in the text refers to the ritual prostitution practiced in the temples of the peoples who had originally settled the land that the Israelites came to occupy.

h. The sin of Rehoboam was that he allowed the renewal of the practice of “ritual prostitution” and, therefore, of the pagan religion forbidden to the Israelites. This is the meaning and interpretation of this verse, and, therefore, it has nothing to do with homosexuality (because the vast majority of the male ritual prostitutes were not homosexual but heterosexual!).

Deuteronomy 23:18. “There shall not be a temple harlot among the Israelite women, nor a temple prostitute among the Israelite men.”

- a. This verse (and the one that follows it in the book of Deuteronomy) are prohibitions against “ritual prostitution,” as explained above.
- b. The intention of this text is to prohibit the practice of pagan religions among the Israelites. It also helped to forbid prostitution in general.
- c. It is evident that this text has nothing to do with homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22. “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman: such a thing is an abomination.”

Leviticus 20:13. “If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed; they have forfeited their lives.”

- a. Chapter 20 of Leviticus is mostly a long list of prescribed punishments incurred by those who would violate the longer list of prohibitions that appear in chapters 17, 18 and 19 of the same biblical book. That’s why both texts quoted above have to be interpreted together. These two verses refer to the same prohibition.
- b. Chapters 17 through 20 of Leviticus explain and emphasize the need for “ritual purity” among the people of Israel (especially among Israelite men). Without being “ritually pure” the Israelites could not expect to offer prayers and sacrifices that would be pleasing to God or heard by God. This biblical book (Leviticus) focuses on “ritual purity” and pays attention to the moral and religious requirements and conditions necessary to guarantee “ritual purity.”
- c. The references (above) to men who lie with men, therefore, are part of Levitical teaching on “ritual purity” and on the behaviors necessary to maintain it. It is important to note that ancient Israelite society (because it was so male-centered) understood men to be responsible for maintaining “ritual purity” and for guaranteeing the conditions and for conducting the rituals necessary for the “purity” of Israel. Mostly because of menstruation and also because of ancient and deep-seated patriarchal prejudice, women were not included in these particular ritual acts of purity.

- d. Lack of “ritual purity” was a serious impediment for the practice of ancient Israel’s religion. It was a very serious sin, with legal, social and political consequences, besides the religious ones.
- e. The lack of “ritual purity,” more importantly, was dangerous for the survival and security of Israel as a people. They believed that they were the chosen people of God; their existence and wellbeing was totally dependent on God’s will and favor. To lack the conditions (“ritual purity” among them) that would allow them to please God meant that the people were threatening their own survival. Consequently, anyone who violated the conditions of “ritual purity” had to be eliminated.
- f. The long list of prohibitions (that appear in chapters 17, 18 and 19 of Leviticus), followed by the list of punishments (in chapter 20), helped establish the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for the people of Israel as the people chosen by God.
- g. But it is very evident that these long lists of prohibitions and punishments reflect the culture and circumstances of ancient Israel (around 1,000-500 years before Christ, about 3,000-2,500 years ago).
 - i. The same lists prohibit certain food items as impure and also as conducive to the loss of “ritual purity.” The lists demand that sacrifices to God be offered at the gate of the Tent, and it specifies how to conduct the sacrifices, how to dispose of blood and meat, and so on.
 - ii. The lists also prohibit incest, the sacrifice of children to pagan gods, and establishes how and when to harvest the fruits of the land, how to do works of charity, how to make judgments, among others.
 - iii. In other words, these Leviticus lists focus on what is recommended and on what is prohibited. Today some of these recommendations or prohibitions might have some value, while others (for example, all that have to do with sacrifices at the gate of the Tent) have little or no usefulness and value.
 - iv. In order to distinguish between what might still be useful and what is now clearly irrelevant we have to understand what each recommendation or prohibition meant in and for the Israelites of Leviticus, in *their* historical and cultural contexts (or what each recommendation and prohibition attempted to establish or protect in *its* time and in *its* context). Otherwise we risk adulterating the texts by forcing our modern meanings (and prejudices) on them.

- h. In the days of Leviticus (a time of male-centered, patriarchal culture, of war, of conquest, of grave and real threats, and of national reorganization) the security of Israel required (in their cultural understanding) that Israelite men be “real men,” or, as we would say today, “very macho.”
- i. This explains why, among the many prohibitions, one forbade men from behaving “as if they were women.” In other words, men must not be weak or tolerate other men who would be weak because the security of Israel demanded that they be strong. The culture of the time assumed that only “manly men” could be strong enough to defend Israel. Women, they assumed, could not be strong so the behavior needed among men had to avoid all similarities with the behavior of women. Furthermore, the important rituals they needed in order to please God and thereby guarantee their security required “purity” that was possible only among men.
- j. Ancient Israel worried over “ritual purity” and over “ritual prostitution” because these were closely connected, in ancient Israelite culture, with survival and security. They existed because God had chosen them, so to please God was absolutely crucial to Israel. They were not worried with homosexuality as we understand it today (a sexual orientation) but with “acting like a woman” (because ancient Israelites thought that women were weak and incapable of strong action to defend Israel or to please God. A man’s prayer at the time thanked God for not having created him female, pagan, or animal!).
- k. These texts of Leviticus have nothing to do with homosexuality.

If we understand that there are many norms and prohibitions in the Old Testament that do not have any value today, and that do not apply today (because of cultural transformations, and because Christianity is not bound to follow the laws of ancient Israel), then it is also important to understand that we cannot judge or condemn anyone today with criteria designed 3,000 years ago, for another world and for other purposes. We cannot violate the intent and purposes of ancient biblical texts by forcing them onto present-day circumstances that are extraordinarily different from those of 3,000 years ago.

4. The following New Testament texts are frequently used to condemn homosexuality.

I Corinthians 6:9. “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 nor homosexuals...” (will not inherit the kingdom).

I Timothy 1:10. (The Law is good and instituted not for the good but for sinners:) "...the unchaste, homosexuals, kidnapers, liars, perjurers..."

- a. The first text, from the First Letter to the Corinthians, was written by the apostle Paul. The second text, from the First Letter to Timothy, was most likely written by a disciple of Paul a generation after Paul's death.
- b. Both texts, in their Koiné Greek originals, use the plural word *malakoi* (in the singular it'd be *malakós*) which some translations render as "homosexuals."
- c. But the word *malakoi* did not mean "homosexuals." It meant "indecent" or "immoral." It was also used, and more strongly, to mean "masturbators." But it never meant "homosexuals" nor implied a reference to homosexuality.
- d. At the time of the authors of the New Testament, their contemporaries knew homosexuals and homosexuality, but *neither Paul nor any of the other writers of the New Testament employed the words more frequently used in their cultures to refer to homosexuality and homosexuals.* Any reader of the letters of Paul, at the time of their writing, would have expected and understood the more usual terms, and yet neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer used these other words.
- e. Neither one of these two texts, therefore, refers to homosexuality. Neither text uses the words for "homosexuals" or "homosexuality" expected in their cultures and at their time.

Romans 1:26-27. (Because they preferred lies to truth) "...God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males..."

- a. This text is from the Letter to the Romans, written by the apostle Paul. It comes from the letter's first chapter where (among other things) Paul speaks of God's judgment against humanity, because humanity has preferred to believe and follow lies instead of truth.
- b. Paul offers here, in this first chapter of his letter to Roman Christians, a series of examples and consequences that come from not following truth. Among these examples and consequences are the two verses cited here.
- c. We must remember two key points:
 - i. Paul did not believe that Christians were obligated to follow Jewish norms or prohibitions. Furthermore, in **none** of his letters does Paul mention

any of the texts from the Old Testament that some people today believe refer to homosexuality.

ii. Chapter 15 of the *Acts of the Apostles* (written at the same time Paul was writing his letters) explicitly states what it is that non-Jewish Christians were bound to observe if they wanted to be Christian—and nowhere is there a mention of homosexuality.

- d. In Romans 1:26-27, the text cited here, Paul is likely referring to heterosexuals who act homosexually without being homosexuals.
- e. It was a widespread custom in the Roman empire that married heterosexual men (and sometimes also married heterosexual women) would become involved in homosexual relationships in order to advance their political or military careers, or advance economically. These homosexual relationships were often not with other homosexual persons. In fact, most of the time these relationships were with other married heterosexuals.
- f. This custom is what Paul condemns. It is the lie that he condemns. For Paul it was “against nature” for a heterosexual to behave homosexually (especially because it was also for political or financial gain).
- g. But nowhere does Paul condemn as “against nature” the homosexual behavior of persons *who are* homosexual.
- h. It is interesting to know that the expression Paul uses here (to say that heterosexuals behaving homosexually are acting “against nature”) is the same expression that appears in chapter 11 (of this same letter) where Paul says that God’s merciful behavior towards non-Jews is “against nature.”
- i. In Paul’s letter to the Romans there is no reference whatsoever to what today we understand by the term “homosexuality.”
- j. These two verses from the letter to the Romans speak of God’s judgment against those who preferred lies to truth. Therefore, it would make no sense whatsoever to think that Paul would expect persons who are homosexuals to live pretending that they are heterosexuals (living a lie)-- this would contradict the point Paul is making in this chapter (that God condemns those who prefer lie to truth).

Nowhere in the New Testament (as also nowhere in the Old Testament) is there any mention of what today is understood by homosexuality. Consequently, if we want to speak the evident truth, in no place does the Bible condemn

homosexuality as sexual orientation, or homosexual behavior among those who are homosexual.

- 5. What the Bible *does* say, and very emphatically, is that all Christians must love their neighbors (no matter who those neighbors are). The Bible also says that God loves everyone (no matter who), always and everywhere, without limits, without exceptions, and without conditions. Whoever says otherwise is adulterating what is most basic in Christianity: to love unconditionally and without limits, as God loves. To judge others, claiming to do so in the name of God, is to falsify the Christian message.**

That is why it is important to remember many other biblical texts. For example, these two texts (that teach the same thing as so many other texts from the Bible do as well):

Romans 8:35, 38-39. “What can separate us from the love of God? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death, nor lie, nor angels, nor principalities, nor the present, nor the future, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- a. The apostle Paul, in this text from his letter to Roman Christians, draws a list of early Christianity's worst enemies (the enemies considered most powerful in the world of the first Christians). This list leads to a single conclusion: nothing and no one can separate us from the love of God. Nothing! No matter what it is, and no matter who it is. The examples Paul includes in his list are so extreme that he makes his point perfectly clear: the love of God has no limits and is not bound by any restrictions (no matter anything anyone else says or does).
- b. Paul, therefore, clearly teaches that homosexuality is not an impediment for the limitless love of God. There is a clear conclusion possible: God loves homosexual persons without limits, without conditions, without exceptions, always and everywhere. This is the same way that God loves everyone else.
- c. Homosexuality, therefore, is not and has never been an obstacle to the love of God, and it cannot separate us from the love of God. This is true, no matter what some other people might want us to believe.

Matthew 25:31-46. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the

goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?' And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

- a. This text is a parable (that is, a story composed by Jesus in order to teach something through it). It is found in the gospel according to Matthew.
- b. The meaning of this text is evident. The only criterion by which Christ will judge us will be our compassion (or lack of it) toward other persons, and especially toward those most in need. Everything we do (or do not do) for those in need we do (or do not do) to Christ himself. Even if we don't know it.
- c. That's why we can again conclude that homosexuality does not condemn us before God. What will condemn us will be our lack of love and compassion towards others (especially those most in need). But if we love, we will be welcomed by Christ!

The text of this booklet was written (originally in Spanish and translated into English) by Orlando Espín, Ph.D.

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