

**HOMOSEXUALITY—AN ABOMINATION  
OR PURELY IRRELEVANT?:  
EVALUATING LGBT CLAIMS IN LIGHT OF THE  
OLD TESTAMENT (GEN. 18–19; LEV. 18:22; 20:13)**

Michael A. Grisanti  
Professor of Old Testament  
The Master’s Seminary

*This article considers God’s revelation concerning homosexuality in three key OT passages: Genesis 19:1–11, Leviticus 18:22, and Leviticus 20:13. These three passages provide a consistent message: homosexuality is a violation of God’s created order and stands opposed to God’s intentions that His people of all ages conduct lives that put His surpassing character on display.*

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**Introduction**

At first blush one might wonder why another article (or a series of lectures<sup>1</sup>) dealing with the LGBT beliefs and practices is needed in 2017? Most know that the debate about the morality or immorality of LGBT behavior has raged for the last few decades, even increasing in fervor over the past several years. However, I believe that the issues we face as Christ-followers have great significance. According to James DeYoung:

Western Civilization has been undergoing as dramatic a shift in its ways of thinking and living as at any point in history. Many describe this turned corner as the rise of postmodernism, which is replacing modernism as the contemporary worldview. That new standards of public morality, ethics, and law have been advanced is not surprising, given the downward spiral of appreciation for any outward role for religion in life. At least from the standpoint of culture and law, our society no longer tolerates public endorsement of Christianity; rather,

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<sup>1</sup> This and other articles in this issue of *The Master’s Seminary Journal* are drawn from the 2017 TMS Faculty Lecture series dealing with “Believers, the Bible, and the LGBT Community.”

the only acceptable public positions are distrust of, or outright antagonism toward, religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Ethical issues that have become matters of public morality—such as abortion, state lotteries, euthanasia, and homosexuality—have become storm-centers of that debate . . . . Now questions about its morality [i.e., homosexuality], its legality as a civil right, and its acceptability as a religious ethic are freely, openly, ubiquitously, and passionately discussed.<sup>2</sup>

Francis Schaeffer, an amazingly perceptive thinker, was unfortunately correct when he wrote that people “drift along from generation to generation and the morally unthinkable becomes thinkable as the years move on.”<sup>3</sup> As an illustration of this, a recent study published by the Pew Research Center (December 18, 2015) affirmed that most U.S. “Christian” groups had become more accepting of homosexuality from 2007–2014.<sup>4</sup> Here are some of their findings:

	<u>2007</u>	<u>2014</u>
Catholics	58%	70%
Mainline Protestants	56%	66%
“All Christians”	44%	54%
Evangelical Protestants	26%	36%
Southern Baptist Conv.	26%	30%

This evidences roughly, generally a 10–12 percent increase in support. Roughly half (51%) of evangelical Protestants in the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) say homosexuality should be accepted by society, compared with a third of evangelical Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964). What is most disconcerting in the above statistics is the growing support of the LGBT agenda by evangelical Christians.

Notice what one conservative law professor wrote after a court case in Indiana that paved the way for the Supreme Court ruling about same-sex couples having the fundamental right to marry:

Cultural pressure is going to radically reduce orthodox Christian numbers in the years to come. The meaning of what it means to be a faithful Christian is going to come under intense fire, not only from outside the churches, but from within.

<sup>2</sup> James De Young, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> C. Everett Koop and Francis Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1983), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Caryle Murphy, “Most U.S. Christian groups grow more accepting of homosexuality,” <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/> (accessed February 1, 2017).

There will be serious stigma attached to standing up for orthodox teaching on homosexuality.<sup>5</sup>

What has contributed to this growing support of the LGBT agenda, even in “believing” communities? I would suggest there is a growing tendency of people to not submit their thinking and beliefs totally to the clear teaching of the Word of God. This is absolutely central to the problem and an essential part of the solution.

So what are believers, as well as seminary students and professors, to do in the face of these changing times?

First, we need to make sure the Bible is always the ultimate authority for how we think, believe, and act. This may seem obvious. But the way we teach, preach, counsel, and invest in lives must always turn our flock’s attention to the truths found in God’s Word. Second, we must know how to lovingly, but accurately, explain what the Bible says about the issues that are part of the LGBT agenda. That will involve having a basic idea of what others are saying about this or that biblical passage and how best we should respond. Third, we must be prepared for increasing challenges to our faith and practice that are coming our way.<sup>6</sup>

In light of those concerns, here are my objectives in this article. First, I hope to remind ourselves about the clarity of the Bible on this issue. God has not left us without biblical clarity concerning how to think biblically about this complicated issue. Second, my desire is that this article will provide a greater understanding of how the larger world understands (and often dismisses) the passages discussed below. Finally, my prayer is that as a result of this study each believer would be better able to respond to those dismissals by correctly handling these texts.

This article will consider the contributions that Genesis 19:1–11 and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 make to the way believers should understand homosexuality. It considers the key features of each passage, the interpretive options, and argues for a certain understanding. In the end, Genesis 19 as well as Leviticus 18 and 20 clearly teach that homosexuality is not biblically acceptable conduct. In addition, the Bible clearly teaches that believers must honor God in how we interact with all sinners, including those who struggle with or practice homosexuality.

## **The Men of Sodom (Genesis 19:1–11)**

### Contextual Development

After Yahweh established His covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1–3), Abraham’s and Lot’s flocks and herds became quite numerous and their servants began to quarrel with each other (13:1–7). Abraham suggested to Lot that they choose different regions for their herds and flocks, and Lot chose the Jordan Valley, setting up his tent near the city of Sodom (13:8–12). The very next verse states that “the men of Sodom were evil, sinning greatly against the Lord” (13:13).

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<sup>5</sup> Rod Dreher, “After Obergefell, Revisiting Prof. Kingsfield,” <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/revisiting-prof-kingsfield-obergefell-religious-liberty/> (accessed February 1, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> I will leave it to others in this issue of the *Journal* who have addressed the issue more pastorally to provide some more precise direction in this area.

Several chapters later Yahweh sent messengers to Abraham and told him that “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is immense, and their sin is extremely serious” (18:20). Abraham, apparently concerned that God might judge righteous people along with the wicked inhabitants of Sodom, repeatedly asked Yahweh whether He would destroy Sodom if a number of righteous people lived there. He reaches the lowest number in Genesis 18:32: “Then he said, ‘Let the Lord not be angry, and I will speak one more time. Suppose 10 [righteous people] are found there?’ He answered, ‘I will not destroy it on account of 10.’” God’s stated intention to destroy Sodom indicates that there were fewer than 10 righteous people in the entire city.

### Key Features of the Passage

The two angels whom Abraham had entertained, appearing as men, arrived in Sodom, and Lot invited them to spend the night at his home. After initially expressing their desire to spend the night in the town square, they eventually accepted Lot’s invitation to host them. After they ate the evening meal, notice what happened (the most significant elements are in italics):

Before they went to bed, the men of the city of Sodom, both young and old, the whole population [NRSV “*to the last man*”], surrounded the house. They called out to Lot and said, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Send them out to us so we can have sex with [*know*] them!” Lot went out to them at the entrance and shut the door behind him. He said, “Don’t do this evil, my brothers. Look, I’ve got two daughters who haven’t had sexual relations [*known*] with a man. I’ll bring them out to you, and you can do whatever you want to them. However, don’t do anything to these men, because they have come under the protection of my roof.” “Get out of the way!” they said, adding, “This one came here as a foreigner, but he’s acting like a judge! Now we’ll do more harm to you than to them.” They put pressure on Lot and came up to break down the door. But the angels reached out, brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. They struck the men who were at the entrance of the house, both young and old [lit., *from the least to the greatest*], with a blinding light so that they were unable to find the entrance.

### Key Questions to Ask

In order to better understand this passage, we need to ask (Q) and answer (A) several important questions.

*Q: Who is involved? A: v. 4—all men of all ages who lived in Sodom*

The pack who “surrounded” the house is inclusive, involving men from every sector of the city and each age group. The merism “both young and old,” that is, everybody (also v. 11), shows that their homosexual practices had become generational. The NIV’s translation, “every part [lit., “end”] of the city,” accents the inclusiveness of the crowd. The participants in this gathered mob came from all over the

city. The Hebrew term *qāṣeh*, which means “end, extremity,” emphasizes this point. It can refer to the population directly, that is, “to the last man” (NRSV; cf. Num 22:41).<sup>7</sup> According to both expressions the point is essentially the same—Sodom’s sexual immorality was pervasive.<sup>8</sup>

*Q: How did they approach Lot’s house? A: v. 4— “surrounded the house”*

They totally “surrounded” the house before even addressing those inside, showing their hostile intentions from the beginning (e.g., Josh. 7:9; cf. Judg. 16:2; Job 16:13).<sup>9</sup> The wicked men of Gibeah employed the same tactic (Judg. 19:22; 20:5). The only ones inside the house at this time were Lot, his wife and two daughters, and two angels seen as men.

*Q: What did they want? A: To have sex with (or “know”) the angels/men in the house*

For the sake of clarity, read the text of verses 5 and 7:

v. 5: “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.”

vv. 7–8: “Don’t do this evil, my brothers. Look, I’ve got two daughters who haven’t known a man.”

The next section will consider the interpretive controversy around this verb.

#### Interpretive Options for the Key Expression “To Know”

The primary issue relates to the meaning of the verb *yāḏa* ‘ in Genesis 19. The main alternatives involve a sexual or non-sexual significance of the verb. One’s interpretation of this verb’s meaning must also consider the impact of Ezekiel’s evaluation of Sodom’s rebellious conduct (Ezek. 16:49–50).

*Does the Hebrew verb yāḏa ‘ mean “to get to know” or “to have sex” in Genesis 19?*

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<sup>7</sup> Claus Westermann renders this phrase, “the whole people to the last man” (*Genesis 12–36*, Continental [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995], 295). He also points out that “The expression refers to the inquiry whether the whole city is really corrupt and so must be destroyed” (p. 301).

<sup>8</sup> K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Allen, “סבב,” *NIDOTTE* 3.219. According to Allen, the verb “is often used in a hostile (e.g., Gen 19:4; Judg 19:22) or military (e.g., 2 Sam 18:15; 2 Kgs 6:15) sense.”

## Supporters of Homosexuality

According to pro-homosexual proponents, this Hebrew verb means “to get to know” and not “to have sex” in this context. They claim that the Hebrew verb “to know” (*yāda*’) does not necessarily mean sexual knowledge.<sup>10</sup> They also argue (correctly) that this verb only relatively rarely signifies “to have intercourse with” (15 times/948 occurrences, e.g., Gen. 4:1).

According to this view, the men of Sodom wanted only to become acquainted with these strangers. They gathered outside of Lot’s home because Lot had exceeded his rights by receiving two foreigners whose credentials had not yet been examined (to see if they were spies).

Perhaps the most developed view involves Morschauser’s<sup>11</sup> contention that when the men say they want to “know” the visitors, they are expressing distrust in Lot’s ability to protect the city from spies and they want to “interrogate” the men. Lot identifies this intention as “wicked” because interrogations in the ancient world were typically not gentle. In this view, Lot offers his daughters as hostages to be held as warranty that he has the situation well in hand.<sup>12</sup>

## Biblical Position

In this passage and several others, the Hebrew verb “to know” (*yāda*’) clearly signifies sexual intercourse. The meaning of a word in any passage is not determined solely on the basis of the number of times it is translated that way in the Bible, but on the *contextual usage* of the word. Once Lot offers his daughters to the men surrounding his home, it becomes clear that sexual intercourse and not getting acquainted is the issue being proposed.<sup>13</sup> As V. Hamilton observes: “Lot would never have made such an unusual suggestion if the request was only for a handshake and moments of chitchat.”<sup>14</sup>

It is true that only 15 instances out of the 948 occurrences of the verb “to know” refer to sexual intimacy.<sup>15</sup> These fifteen passages include instances where the man is

<sup>10</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 93–94; cf. D. S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, 1955), pp. 4–8; John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 42–50. Many other sources could be cited.

<sup>11</sup> S. Morschauser, “‘Hospitality,’ Hostiles and Hostage: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19:1–9,” *JSOT* 27, no. 4 (2003): 472–76.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 461, 474–82.

<sup>13</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 136–37; P. M. Ukleja, “Homosexuality and the Old Testament,” *BSac* 140 (1983): 260–62; D. L. Bartlett, “A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality,” *Foundations: Baptist Journal of History and Theology* 20 (1977): 134.

<sup>14</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 34.

<sup>15</sup> These statistics are taken from G. J. Botterweck, “*yāda*’,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5:453.

the subject (Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; 38:26; Judg. 19:25; 1 Sam. 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4) or where the woman is the subject (Gen. 19:8; Num. 31:17, 18, 35; Judg. 11:39). In only two cases a man is both the subject and object of the verb (i.e., homosexual intercourse—Genesis 19:5 and Judges 19:22).<sup>16</sup> A more challenging obstacle for the pro-homosexual interpretation of this verb is that whenever the Hebrew verb “to know” has a personal direct object (i.e., to know someone, not something), the verb always has a *sexual innuendo*.<sup>17</sup> Another linguistic feature is often overlooked by pro-homosexual proponents. Even though it is well known that the Hebrew verb *yāda* ‘ can connote sexual knowledge, what is less known is that Hebrew shares this feature with several other Semitic languages.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Jude 7 characterizes the conduct of Sodom and Gomorrah this way: “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” According to Jude, sexual perversion was at least a key aspect of the rebellion that characterized the city.

### *What about Ezekiel 16:49–50?*

“Now this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, plenty of food, and comfortable security, but didn’t support the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before Me, so I removed them when I saw this.”

### Supporters of Homosexuality

They affirm that the only sin committed by the men of Sodom involved breaking the laws of hospitality. Any idea of sexual assault is arbitrarily read into the text. In addition to this, various scholars point out that none of the numerous passages (Deut. 29:23; 32:32; Isa. 1:9–10; 3:9; 13:19; 49:18; Jer. 23:14; Lam. 4:6; Amos 4:1–11; Zeph. 2:8–11; Matt 10:5–10; et al; esp. Ezek. 16:49–50) that refer to Sodom and Gomorrah as a paradigm for sinful conduct ever mention sexually aberrant behavior.

One of them concludes: “If Sodom’s sin had indeed been same-sex behavior, it’s highly unlikely that every written discussion of the city for centuries following its destruction would fail to mention that.”<sup>19</sup> John McNeill affirms that “the sin of

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, as Hamilton points out, “in Gen. 19:5 but not in Judg. 19:22 or anywhere else, the LXX renders *yāda* ‘ with *synginōskō* (‘to meet, converse with’) instead of the usual *ginōskō*. The LXX has here chosen a word capable of innocuous interpretation in the context” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 33–34); cf. John A. Lee, “Equivocal and Stereotyped Renderings in the LXX,” *RB* 87 (1980): 109–10.

<sup>17</sup> John H. Walton, “Genesis,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 93.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent, 2015), 64; Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox, 2004), 42–78.

Sodom was never interpreted in the Old Testament times as being primarily sexual; rather, it is portrayed as a sin of pride and inhospitality.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Gordon Wenham:

What is surprising and deeply shocking is their total disregard for the accepted principles of eastern hospitality. Visitors, whether anticipated or not, must be treated with the utmost courtesy and kindness. Here the men of Sodom show utter disregard for the rules of hospitality, and suggest Lot’s visitors submit to the most demeaning treatment they can devise, a treatment elsewhere used on prisoners of war. So the sin of Sodom is not primarily homosexuality as such, but an assault on weak and helpless visitors who according to justice and tradition they ought rather to have protected (Ezk 16:49).<sup>21</sup>

Biblical Position—*Ezekiel 16 does not just refer to inhospitable conduct, but also “detestable acts.”*

Here are a handful of points that will help us understand how Ezekiel 16 relates to Genesis 19. First, the sin of Sodom (and Gomorrah) must not be minimized. Notice these two passages from Genesis:

Then the LORD said, “The *outcry* (תִּקְרָא; *z’ āqāh*) against Sodom and Gomorrah is immense, and their sin is extremely serious. I will go down to see if what they have done justifies the cry that has come up to Me. If not, I will find out” (Gen. 18:20–21).

for we are about to destroy this place because the *outcry* (תִּקְרָא; *z’ āqāh*) against its people is so great before the LORD, that the LORD has sent us to destroy it (Gen. 19:13).

According to N. Sarna, these two nouns for *outcry*, very similar in Hebrew, “connote the anguished cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the victim for help in the face of some great injustice. In the Bible, these terms are suffused with poignancy and pathos, with moral outrage and soul-stirring passion . . . [the second term] is especially used in connection with the suffering of the poor and the impoverished

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<sup>20</sup> McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, 68; Marin also writes: “None of the themes in Ezekiel 16 are even remotely close to resembling the committed monogamous same-sex relationships we know of today. Because of that, pro-gay theologians assert that the overarching theme to Genesis 19 is not homosexuality.” Andrew Marin, *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 118.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, “Attitudes to Homosexuality in the OT,” *Expository Times* 102, no 12 (1991): 361.

victims of avaricious exploitation.”<sup>22</sup> He concludes his treatment of this issue by stating: “In 18:20f. the guilt of the city is still to be proved. Now its guilt is established beyond all doubt. Its punishment is inevitable.”<sup>23</sup>

Also, remember some verses in the near context of Genesis 19 that we have already seen:

Now the men of Sodom were evil, sinning greatly against the Lord (Gen. 13:13).

Then he said, “Let the Lord not be angry, and I will speak one more time. Suppose 10 [righteous people] are found there?” He answered, “I will not destroy it on account of 10” (Gen. 18:32).

Second, the sin that was *intended but averted* in Genesis 19 did involve homosexual rape. That was surely not all the sin that characterized Sodom, but it represented a very dark side of the city. Ezekiel uses several words that point to the widespread and offensive nature of Sodom’s sin—not just inhospitality and a lack of compassion:

Didn’t you walk in their ways and do their detestable practices? It was only a short time before you behaved more corruptly than they did. “As I live”—the declaration of the Lord GOD—“your sister Sodom and her daughters have not behaved as you and your daughters have. Now this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, plenty of food, and comfortable security, but didn’t support the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before Me, so I removed them when I saw this” (47–50).

Third, Ezekiel uses Sodom as his example to draw on two aspects of Sodom “symbolism” found throughout the Old Testament: (1) Sodom as the pinnacle example of wickedness; and (2) Sodom as the arch-example of the destructive wrath of God.<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, as a core part of Yahweh’s expectations of His chosen people—made evident through Mosaic Law—the Lord wanted Israel to put His surpassing character on display to each other and the surrounding nations by excelling in their pursuit of justice and equity as well as kindness and compassion in their dealing with each other (fellow citizens) as well as Gentiles passing through their region (Exod. 19:4–6; Deut. 26:16–19).

Fifth, we must keep in mind that Ezekiel is indicting Judah (and Jerusalem) for their covenant treachery—consistent rebellion against Yahweh. The prophet Ezekiel compares Jerusalem to two sisters—Samaria to the north and Sodom to the south. Judah’s main problem was not the practice of homosexuality (though it existed as part of the pagan worship that happened too frequently in their midst). Their refusal

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<sup>22</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 132.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> J. A. Loader, “The prophets and Sodom: The prophetic use of the Sodom and Gomorrah theme,” *Theological Studies* vol. 47, no. 1 (1991): 14–15.

to practice justice/equity and kindness/compassion in everyday life represented their rejection of the agenda God had given them—put Him on display before all around you. Guess what that kind of rebellious conduct could be called—inhospitality, pride, lack of kindness, etc.! Consequently, what Ezekiel emphasizes in this passage does not minimize or rule out the sexual nature of Sodom’s sin in Genesis 19. Instead, the prophet focuses on aspects of Judah’s sin that did not match the sexual sin of Sodom in this passage.

Finally, if the gang rape had taken place in Sodom, it would have represented the height of indignity and an absolute lack of hospitality to guests of the city. However, that does not at all temper the morally detestable conduct that gang rape would have involved.

*Wasn't it homosexual rape and not loving, committed, consensual same-sex relationships that were described in Genesis 19?*

### Supporters of Homosexuality

Numerous scholars point out that the narrative of Genesis 19 does not depict homosexual desires or general homosexual behavior.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, for them the Genesis 19 narrative is not relative to the question of the morality of same-sex relationships.<sup>26</sup>

On the one hand, it is a fair observation that the worst-case scenario of homosexuality in the Old Testament (along with Judges 19) should not be our first, only, or greatest support for our biblical position. Nevertheless, this sad narrative is not without relevance to understanding the biblical perspective on homosexuality. Rather, the OT and NT statements about God’s intentions for marriage, the Leviticus examples, and the statements about the ongoing practice of homosexuality are better places to build our strongest case.

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<sup>25</sup> According to John Boswell, Genesis 19 is “only tangentially related to sexuality” (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 114. L. W. Countryman states that there is no basis for finding a “universal condemnation of homosexuality or even of homosexual acts” in Genesis 19 (L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988], 31. George Edwards equates any linking of Sodom with homosexuality in general as “essentially heretical” (*Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective* [New York, Pilgrim, 1984], 68, cf. 44, 46). For others examples, see Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 164; Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square, 2000), 43–50; Michael B. Regele, *Science, Scripture, and Same-Sex Love* (Nashville: Abingdon 2014), 127–31; Choon-Leong Seow, “Textual Orientation,” in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 21–22; Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 4–5; many others could be cited.

<sup>26</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 65–66; Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 42. Sprinkle concludes that Genesis 19 “does not contribute” to the question of the morality of same-sex relationships (*idem*).

## Biblical Position

Although this passage does describe the averted threat of homosexual rape, it still has significance for the biblical outlook on homosexuality. There are various OT passages that use certain verbs that connote “abuse,” “violate,” “seize,” “lay with,” “humble” (Shechemites and Dinah—Gen. 34:2; Amon and Tamar—2 Sam. 13:14; biblical laws about rape—Deut. 22:25–27). In the “parallel” passage to Genesis 19 (Judg. 19:12–30), the host brusquely offers his virgin daughter and the levite’s concubine to the crowd gathered outside. He tells these men to oppress/humiliate/rape them and to do whatever else they wanted (Judg. 19:24).

In Genesis 19, the narrator (Moses) chooses to use the verb “to know” throughout this passage, a verb that never has the nuance of rape or abuse. Lot did not say: “Do not rape my visitors . . . Here are my daughters—rape them.” Lot (or the narrator) avoids using any verb that has clear-cut indications of sexual aggression. Clearly, then, the incident frowns on homosexual relations for whatever reason.<sup>27</sup> In the book of Judges, where moral anarchy is the norm, the host had no similar inhibitions.

What happened and could have happened in Genesis 19 is horrific, to say the least. Lot’s offer of his daughters to the gathered crowd of lustful men is incomprehensible. It does seem, however, that the biblical narrator (Moses) chose words that would have clearly violated what “to know” should have meant—sexual intimacy in a committed male-female relationship. Consequently, the sad narrative of Genesis 19 does present homosexuality as a departure of God’s intention for His creation.

## Passages in Leviticus

### Larger Context of Leviticus

Yahweh established a special, covenantal relationship with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 12:1–3 (cf. Gen. 15 and 17). He worked in and through the patriarchs over the following centuries (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). After leading them down to Egypt, where Israel eventually became Egyptian slaves, God raised up Moses to deliver His chosen people from their bondage as part of His bringing to pass His promised plan for the covenant nation—establishing them in the land of promise.

It is essential to recognize that the Lord chose Israel to be His special people, not because of their own merit or righteousness, but simply for His own purposes. He intended that both they and the world might know Him (Gen. 1:26–27; Exod. 6:7).

After delivering them from Egypt and enabling them to cross the Red Sea, God led them to Mt. Sinai where He gave them His covenant demands (the Mosaic Law). The Ten Commandments are a short form of the stipulations of the covenant and the rest of the Law (Exodus 21–40, Leviticus, parts of Numbers, and much of Deuteronomy) provide a fleshing out of the meaning and implications of the commandments.

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<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, 34–35.

These covenant demands did not merely involve a loose collection of arbitrary laws, but were part of a covenant (a binding agreement based on an ongoing relationship) between God and His people.

One could summarize this covenant agreement as follows: “I agree to be your God. I commit myself to you to care for you, defend you, and bless you. You agree to be my people. You must therefore live lives like Mine. You must . . .” (Exod. 6:7–8; 19:3–8).

As Exodus 19:4–6 make clear, God gave Israel these clear, objective, and propositional stipulations to His covenant people to enable them to represent Him before each other as well as the surrounding nations. These laws provided the Israelites with a clear and concrete understanding of how they could conduct their lives so as to put God’s surpassing character on display.

On the one hand, many of the regulations were very relevant to Israel because they prohibited many corrupt practices that were prevalent in the land of Canaan (the land they were about to enter). To emulate those godless practices would destroy any witness for God’s marvelous character.

On the other hand, homosexuality (along with adultery, incest, and bestiality in this context) are not prohibited just because they are the incidental practices of Israel’s pagan neighbors. They are prohibited because they deny the creation order of God and thus the very nature of God Himself.

In summary, the laws of Leviticus were part of an ongoing relationship between the Israelites and their sovereign God. They describe what those who are in covenant with the Creator must do or not do in order to direct the attention of their fellow Israelites and surrounding Gentiles to the surpassing character of their God.

Before considering the two other OT passages in Leviticus that relate to the issue of homosexuality, we must first consider the *more narrow context* of Leviticus 18 and 20.

### The Near Context of Leviticus 18 and 20

In Exodus 25–40 God gave all the instructions for the building of the Tabernacle. The climax of the section occurs in 40:34–38 when the Shekinah Glory (God’s presence manifested in a cloud) swept into residence. *This* is the clue to what Leviticus is all about. No one can understand the laws and the details of the book without meditating first on what this passage means. It is the manifestation of the eternal God dwelling in the midst of the people. He is their Immanuel (“God with us”). Consequently, the defining concern of all of Leviticus is the arrangement of life around His presence: *How should (would) people live if the eternal, holy, almighty God lived with them—God is in their midst?* Leviticus answers the specific questions in relation to this.

First, how do profane and sinful people live around such a holy presence? Leviticus 1–7 provides the answer—the *manual of sacrifice*. Second, how shall profane people reach the Holy God in worship, and God reach them? Leviticus 8–10 offers the answer—the *consecrated mediatorial priesthood*. Third, how shall the holiness of God dominate and sanctify the profane life? Leviticus 11–16 gives the answer—the *manual of purification*. Finally, how shall God’s covenant people obey God so

that their distinctive living would point to God's surpassing character? Leviticus 17–27 points to the answer—the laws of holiness.

### The Details of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

In this last section of Leviticus (chs. 17–27), Moses first delineates how God's character demands that the Israelites offer sacrifices to him at the Tabernacle and avoid eating blood. Leviticus 18 presents different prohibitions against various kinds of sexual relationships that represented covenant treachery. Leviticus 20 has many similarities with chapter 18, giving more attention to the penalties for sinful behavior. Between these two chapters, chapter 19 serves as an important summary of the Law of Moses. 19:1–18 focuses on aspects of loving your neighbor as yourself while the rest of the chapter gives attention to various detailed stipulations of that Law. Throughout Moses's presentation of these covenant requirements, he keeps his focus on the relational core of those requirements by repeating the expression, "Yahweh your God" thirteen times (18:2, 4, 30; 19:2, 3, 4, 10, 25, 31, 34, 36; 20:7, 24).

After addressing incestuous unions (18:6–18), Moses delineated several abhorrent Canaanite customs, including homosexual sex (18:22). Here are the two related passages in Leviticus 18:

Lev. 18:22: "You are not to sleep with a man as with a woman; it is detestable."

Lev. 20:13: "If a man sleeps with a man as with a woman, they have both committed a detestable thing. They must be put to death; their blood is on their own hands."

### *Leviticus 18:22*

#### Canaanite (and broader ANE) Background

It is fair to assume that the practices condemned in Leviticus 18 were common in Canaanite society. Yahweh prohibited the Israelites from conducting their lives like the Canaanites and thereby damaging their ability to demonstrate God's surpassing character to each other and the surrounding nations.

Various ANE laws provide a spectrum of attitudes toward homosexuality. Some law codes mention nothing about it. Egyptian mythology refers to examples of the god Seth having sexual relations with his younger brother, Horus. Hittite law declared that sodomy with one's son was a capital crime, but allowed it with other men. Assyrian law appears to make a blanket prohibition against sodomy, but that may only apply to homosexual rape.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB (New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 2008), 1566.

It must be emphasized that the difference between the biblical legislation and other Near Eastern laws not be overlooked: the Bible allows for *no exceptions*—all acts of sodomy are prohibited, whether performed by rich or poor, higher or lower status, citizen or alien.<sup>29</sup> Yahweh’s prohibition of any Israelite involvement with homosexuality represented one facet of their distinctive witness in a sinful world.

### Theological Background

In addition to the clarity of these two passages in Leviticus, the theological backdrop for this law would have framed the reader’s understanding—God’s design is that human sexuality must be expressed in marital, heterosexual relationships (Gen. 1:27–28; 2:22–24; cf. Matt. 19:4–5).<sup>30</sup>

We will briefly consider key features of both passages<sup>31</sup> and then give attention to the ways they may or may not relate to the LGBT agenda. In Leviticus 18:22 there are two primary issues that are debated by scholars (with regard to meaning/significance).

Key Feature #1—What is the basic point of the verse? Leviticus 18:22 begins with “a male” in the Hebrew text, giving it emphasis. What the verse presents as abhorrent is a man lying with another man “as with a female.”

Almost all modern translations explain the expression “as with a woman” to refer to sexual intercourse between two men as if one of the men were a woman. A brief overview of a number of the major commentaries on Leviticus<sup>32</sup> demonstrates a consensus that these two passages in Leviticus clearly refer to homosexuality, which was firmly prohibited for Israelites as part of their covenant loyalty. In addition, this is the consistent Jewish interpretation until later in their history.<sup>33</sup> As Roy

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 238.

<sup>31</sup> This article cannot pursue many of the details in this verse that demand attention. A chapter in a recent dissertation by one of our TMS Ph.D. students (Peter Goeman, “The Role of the Law in the Homosexuality Debate: Assessing the Old Testament Prohibitions Against Homosexuality from a Perspective of Discontinuity,” [unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Master’s Seminary, 2017], 79–140), provides a marvelous summary of the interpretive debate of the verse’s key features. The overview of those features here draws heavily on Goeman’s chapter.

<sup>32</sup> Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 321; R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 194–95; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1998), 297; Richard S. Hess, “Leviticus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis–Leviticus*, rev. ed. eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 1:742–43; Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 123; Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1566; Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 246–67; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 259.

<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Jakobovits, “Homosexuality,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 9:516.

Gane writes, “The language is devastatingly untechnical, leaving no room for ambiguity.”<sup>34</sup>

Other scholars have narrowed the interpretation of this expression to other options: only anal intercourse and not other sexual acts,<sup>35</sup> only male-male incest,<sup>36</sup> forbidding a man from choosing to be a passive sex partner for another man,<sup>37</sup> or prohibiting only sexual relationships between married men.<sup>38</sup> Because of space and time limitations, this article does not present the support offered for those alternative views.

**Key Feature #2:** What does “abomination” signify? One’s understanding of this term also impacts their interpretation of both passages. The noun translated “abomination” or “detestable” occurs 117 times in 112 passages.<sup>39</sup> This noun occurs six times in Leviticus 18 and 20 (18:22, 26, 27, 29, 30; 20:13). The term “abomination” generally refers to “a thing or practice considered reprehensible in the eyes of another.”<sup>40</sup> We will explain this term further below. Having provided a *brief overview* of the key interpretive issues in 18:22, let’s turn to 20:13, where we will provide a fuller treatment of some of the key issues.

### *Leviticus 20:13*

This verse reads: “If a man sleeps with a man as with a woman, they have both committed a detestable thing. They must be put to death; their blood is on their own hands.”

When compared to Leviticus 18:22, covered above, this verse provides one additional insight concerning men who might participate in homosexual relations: both men who engaged in homosexual relations “must be put to death”. The offenses of adultery (20:10), incest with the father’s wife (20:11), incest with a daughter-in-law (20:12), as well as homosexuality (20:13) all receive the same punishment—both

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<sup>34</sup> Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 321.

<sup>35</sup> Saul M. Olyan, “‘And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying Down of a Woman’: On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 204.

<sup>36</sup> David T. Stewart, “Ancient Sexual Laws: Text and Intertext of the Biblical Holiness Code and Hittite Law” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000), 72–74.

<sup>37</sup> Jerome T. Walsh, “Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: Who Is Doing What to Whom?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 205–6.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Wells, “The Grammar and Meaning of the Leviticus Texts on Same-Sex Relations Reconsidered” (unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, November 24, 2014), 13–18.

<sup>39</sup> Word statistics are provided by the Logos 7 database unless otherwise noted. The cognate verb form also occurs twenty-two times and means “to become abhorred” or “to abhor,” “to desecrate,” or “to act abominably”. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., revised by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson (New York: Brill, 1994–2000), 765–66.

<sup>40</sup> Sklar, *Leviticus*, 238. Cf. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament—Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 379–406.

guilty parties were to be put to death. Scholars do not debate what Leviticus 20:13 affirms, but differ on the way to understand any normative meaning.

### The Interpretive Options for Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Lev. 18:22: “You are not to sleep with a man as with a woman; it is detestable.”

Lev. 20:13: “If a man sleeps with a man as with a woman, they have both committed a detestable thing. They must be put to death; their blood is on their own hands.”

#### Key Feature—What Does “Abomination” Mean?

##### *Supporters of Homosexuality*

Supporters contend that the term “abomination” is not an ethical or moral term, but a kind of boundary marker, having the basic idea of “taboo.”<sup>41</sup> They recognize that the Book of Leviticus condemned homosexuality, but it also called menstruation unclean, rejects the charging of interest on loans, and refers to burning incense as an abomination. Matthew Vines concludes this: “So while *abomination* is a negative word, it doesn’t necessarily correspond to Christian views of sin.”<sup>42</sup>

These scholars conclude that Leviticus reflects primitive thinking about ancient taboos. Because Christians do not have the same fears that the ancients had, those laws that were part of the ritual of ancient Israel have been done away with now in the New Testament.

##### *Biblical Position*

In this passage “abomination” refers to morally detestable conduct. The noun, “abomination,” can signify things that are broadly repulsive or that God finds *generally offensive* (Prov. 6:16). It can refer to acts that are detestable for *cultural* rather than intrinsic moral reasons. For example, this would include the Egyptians’ avoidance of eating with Israelites (Gen. 43:32; cf. 46:34; Exod 8:26). It could point to *ritual limitations* that were part of the Mosaic Law, as with unclean foods (Deut. 14:3). Most seriously, it refers to acts that are detestable because they go *against the moral fiber* of God’s created world.<sup>43</sup> This would include idolatry (a denial of Israel’s covenant Lord—Deut. 7:25–26; 12:31; 17:4; 20:18; 27:15), unacceptable worship (ignoring God’s demand for unblemished animals, an act of treachery—Deut. 17:1),

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<sup>41</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation concerning Homosexuality: Old Testament Contribution,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 152; cf. Olyan, 180; Daniel Boyarin, “Are There Any Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality’?,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 3 (1995): 334.

<sup>42</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 85.

<sup>43</sup> Sklar, *Leviticus*, 238.

human sacrifice (worshipping God like some pagans—Deut. 12:31), practicing occult (turning to empty sources for guidance, thereby rejecting God—Deut. 18:12), and dishonest business practices (representing Yahweh as a cheater rather than committed to justice and equity—Deut. 25:16; Prov. 11:1; 20:10, 23; cf. Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:13–15). In Leviticus 18 incest, adultery, bestiality, and child sacrifice are also called an abomination.

Consequently, homosexuality involves detestable conduct because it denies God's created order and involves the rejection of Yahweh's stated intention for sexuality (Gen. 1:27–28; 2:22–24), something that the New Testament emphasized (Rom 1:26–27; cf. Matt. 19:4–5).

*How do some pro-homosexual scholars seek to dismiss these Mosaic laws?*

I can only briefly mention and respond to these suggestions in this article. First, some scholars affirm that these rules were intended for priests and are irrelevant to Christians in the church.<sup>44</sup> In response, the holiness laws of Leviticus 18–20 were for all Israel, not just for the priests of Israel (18:1—“Speak to the Israelites and tell them . . .”).

Second, others contend that the only reason homosexual behavior is condemned in Leviticus is because of its association with idolatry in pagan worship. For example, one proponent writes:

From this priestly point of view, it is clear that above all else, Israel was to be uncontaminated by her pagan neighbors. In all things, she was to remain a separate “pure vessel unto the Lord.” At this time, male prostitutes in the temples of the Canaanites, Babylonians, and other neighboring peoples were common features of pagan rites. There, it is understandable that this “homosexuality” connected with the worship of false gods would certainly color Israel's perspective on any and all homosexual activity.<sup>45</sup>

A related conclusion is that homosexuality that is not associated with idolatry would be acceptable. In response, various kinds of covenant treachery are cited in Leviticus 18 and 20 that are morally offensive and would introduce a breach in an Israelites' relationship with Yahweh. Idolatry represents a serious offense, but is not presented as the umbrella offense for these chapters.

Third, some propose that the laws prohibiting homosexual activity, along with the other varied regulations in the context, are limited to Judaism and are irrelevant to the present age. Proponents of this idea refer to rules about clean and unclean food, rules about not mixing clothing (e.g., linen and wool, etc.). They affirm that these Mosaic requirements are part of the priestly holiness code and are concerned only

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Olson, “Untangling the Web: A Look at What Scripture Does and Does Not Say About Homosexual Behavior,” *Other Side* (April 1984): 25.

<sup>45</sup> Ralph Blair, *An Evangelical Look at Homosexuality*, rev. ed. (New York: Evangelicals Concerned, 1977), p. 3; cf. N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers*, NCB (London: Nelson, 1969), 88.

with ritual purity (conditioned), not moral teaching (normative). In response, Allen Ross offers a helpful reply: “This argument is frequently effective because people are ignorant of Leviticus. It is true that the regulations connected with the sanctuary have been done away with (for different reasons); but the moral infractions of God’s created order were never merely part of the purity ritual of the sanctuary. And they have not been done away with. That the New Testament fully endorses the law on this point should be sufficient to settle the matter.”<sup>46</sup>

### Summary

The text of Leviticus 18 and 20 is very clear—“The text simply refers to the Canaanite practices that must be avoided—and one of them is homosexuality.”<sup>47</sup> It is essential that believers grasp the essential truth that Yahweh gave the Mosaic Law to Israel to teach His people about God and His expectations of them as well as to enable them to be witnesses of this great God to the Ancient Near Eastern world around them. His covenant requirements were meant to enable His covenant people to have a concrete understanding of how they could conduct their lives in a way that put God’s surpassing character on display—to each other as fellow citizens as well as to the Gentiles all around them.

### Conclusion

This article has briefly considered God’s revelation concerning homosexuality in three key OT passages: Genesis 19:1–11, Leviticus 18:22, and Leviticus 20:13. These three passages provide a consistent message: homosexuality is a violation of God’s created order and stands opposed to God’s intentions that His people of all ages conduct lives that put His surpassing character on display.

Unfortunately, we live in a day when the Bible’s authority and clear relevance to this topic is rejected. As an example, a pro-homosexual writer, Robin Scroggs, writes this: “Not only is the New Testament church uninterested in the topic, it has nothing new to say about it.”<sup>48</sup> A few pages later, he writes: “Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today’s debate . . . [the Bible] does not address the issues involved.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 375. A related idea is that the Mosaic laws are irrelevant to NT Christians in general. Although this author enthusiastically believes that the Mosaic laws do not function as laws for NT Christians, those laws are still relevant since they provide a clear revelation of God’s surpassing character.

<sup>47</sup> Ross, *Holiness to the Lord*, 347.

<sup>48</sup> Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), 101.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

Where Does that Leave Us?

- We need to make the Bible our sole authority on how we understand God's view of homosexuality.
- We need to present the message of the life-transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ to all around us, including those who might be convinced that they have been made to be homosexuals.
- We must lovingly bring the clarity of God's Word to bear to the people God has entrusted us in our contexts of ministry as well as people we encounter who embrace the world's general rejection of God's intentions about homosexuality as revealed in Scripture.