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Interpretations of the “Clobber Verses”

Genesis 19 – Sodom and Gomorrah: A Lesson in Hospitality

In this story, two angelic figures visit the city of Sodom. Lot encountered the two men at the gate and hospitably welcomed them into his home and made them a feast. When the male citizens of the town heard these visitors had arrived, they went to Lot’s home and demanded the visitors be turned over to the crowd to be violently sexually assaulted by the group. To protect his guests, Lot offered to sacrifice his virgin daughters to the crowd instead. The crowd wasn’t abated and tried to attack Lot. The angelic visitors protected Lot and helped Lot and his loved ones escape the city before it was destroyed.

The text doesn’t describe a consensual relationship between people who love each other. It describes the opposite. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about the sin of replacing hospitality with the desire for violence, dominance, and exclusion.

Leviticus 18:22, 20: 13 – The Holiness Code

The Hebrew Bible contains six hundred thirteen laws intended to distinguish Jewish people from other cultural and ethnic groups. The laws were crafted so Jewish people could distinguish themselves from the profane worldliness of “others” by focusing on obedience and ritual purity. The Leviticus Holiness Code is contained within those laws. The Code contains two verses associated with homosexuality.

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

Lev 20: 13 “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

The original Hebrew text does not have the words “as with” in it. Translators inserted the words “as with” to try and make sense of an obscure text. Many biblical scholars believe the original Hebrew was referring to an incestuous relationship because the sixteen verses preceding the text list various forms of incest.

Further, in contemporary culture, Christians often categorize these laws for self-serving purposes. Christians define some laws as “moral laws” to be followed for all time, while other laws are purely “ceremonial” and not meant to be followed for all time. These categories do not exist in the Bible. For example, being kind and



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not murdering people are considered “moral laws,” while wearing clothes of mixed fabric and stoning disrespectful children to death are often considered “ceremonial” laws that only applied in ancient Israel.

The use of the word “abomination” in these two laws is rather startling for modern readers. It is significant to note that other Biblical “abominations” include: Mixing fabric, eating non-kosher foods, and touching pig skin. The sin of ignoring the Sabbath is punishable by death per the Leviticus Holiness Code.

Matthew 19:4-5 – The Pharisees set a trap for Jesus.

In this passage, the Pharisees attempt to ensnare Jesus in a trap. Divorce was a highly polarizing issue at the time and the Pharisees thought a controversial answer would hurt Jesus’ growing popularity. It’s important to know when Jesus was alive, women didn’t have any rights (and were treated as property) so if her husband divorced her, she had nothing. No place to live, no money, no family, no food.

So, when the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” Jesus responded by quoting Genesis 1, a passage affirming that men shouldn’t divorce their wives. Jesus knew the Pharisees understood the passage. The Pharisees continued probing Jesus saying that Moses said men could divorce their wives for anything “objectionable.”

Anything “objectionable” was an extremely low bar and made it very easy for men to summarily destroy a woman’s life. Jesus responded by affirming that marriage is a sacred connection created by God and should not be taken or dismissed lightly.

This passage highlights Jesus’s ability to remain true to God while responding to an antagonistic interrogation or trap. Jesus answers the Pharisees’ questions and challenges them to consider the women.

Paul and Sexuality: Challenging conventions

Romans 1: 24-27

To better understand these verses, it’s important to view them within the broader context of Romans 1-3. In these verses, Paul is laying out his thesis that no one is



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righteous, that everyone has sinned. Specifically, the Jewish people used the Levitical laws to maintain obedience, but people rarely followed them well enough to earn salvation. The gentiles didn’t have laws to follow but rather “exchanged” worshiping God for worshiping idols.

In Romans 1:24-25, Paul suggests that God responded to the gentile’s exchanging Godly desire for selfish desires by forsaking them and letting them be consumed by the lust in their heart. Paul lists twenty-one behaviors the gentiles exchanged for worshiping God. They include: gossiping, boasting, faithlessness, and children being rebellious toward their parents. Paul also included men and women exchanging “natural intercourse for unnatural.” The contemporary and cursory interpretation of “natural intercourse” was intercourse between a man and a woman, while “unnatural intercourse” occurred between individuals of the same sex.

However, a deeper and more nuanced contextual understanding of the social climate of Paul’s day leads to a more compelling and less harmful interpretation. Namely, “unnatural intercourse” had nothing to do with same-sex intercourse but rather with lustful, excessive, non-consensual, and indiscriminate intercourse.

In Paul’s time, the ancient near east of 2,000 years ago, there was no concept of “sexual orientation.” Consequently, there was no context for Paul to attach “straight” or “gay” to “natural” or “unnatural.” It is also important to note that the most common sexual encounters in the ancient world were between masters and slaves, men and adolescent boys, and male prostitution. Further, at the time Paul wrote to the Romans, the Greco-Roman value of moderation was considered a prime virtue, and excess was hedonistic self-indulgence.

So what might Paul have meant by the words “natural” and “unnatural?” Early (4th Century CE!) Biblical Theological John Chrysostom offered insight, “Notice how carefully Paul measures his words. For he does not say that they were enamored of one another but that they were consumed by lust for one another! You see that the whole of desire comes from an excess which cannot contain itself within proper limits.”

Based on this context, when Paul spoke of “natural” and “unnatural” he was likely referring to hedonistic and out-of-control sexual acts driven by selfish lust across



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unequal power dynamics, as opposed to loving and consensual sexual relationships.

There are different ways to interpret Paul’s words, and many make it clear that Paul was not condemning consensual, grace-filled, mutually respectful, romantic relationships between people who are enamored with each other and happen to be of the same gender.

1 Corinthians 6:9 1 Timothy 1: 8-10

The first time the word “homosexual” was added to the Bible was in 1946. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10, Paul used the term *arsenakatoi*, which the 1946 RSV Bible translation team initially interpreted to mean “homosexual.” Soon after the publication of the 1946 RSV Bible, however, the RSV translation team underwent additional research, reflection, and prayer and realized the behavior Paul described in these passages reflected abusive sexual relationships rather than loving, consensual relationships, homosexual or otherwise.

The team concluded that the term “sexual pervert” was a more apt translation. Unfortunately, the head of the RSV translation team had entered into a contract with the publisher not to change the RSV for ten years. Ten years later, the RSV Bible changed “homosexual” to “sexual perverts.” However, during those ten long years, three different Bible translation teams (NASB, TLB, NIV) added “homosexual” to their Bibles citing the RSV. Even after the RSV translation team changed their interpretation of *arsenakatoi* to “sexual perverts” the other three translation teams did not.