

# What the Evidence *Really* Says about Scripture and Homosexual Practice: Five Issues

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## 1. Jesus

*Claim:* Jesus had no interest in maintaining a male-female requirement for sexual relations.

***What the evidence really shows:* Jesus believed that a male-female requirement for sexual relations was foundational, a core value of Scripture's sexual ethics on which other sexual standards should be based, including the 'twoness' of a sexual union.**

Jesus preached marital twoness—the restriction of the number of persons in a sexual union to two, whether concurrently (no polygamy) or serially (no cycle of divorce and remarriage) —on the fact that “from the beginning of creation, ‘male and female He made them’ [Gen 1:27] and ‘for this reason a man ... will be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh’ [Gen 2:24]” (Mark 10:2-12; Matt 19:3-9). In other words, the fact that God had designed two (and only two) primary sexes for complementary sexual pairing was Jesus’ basis for a rigorous monogamy position. He reasoned that, since the union of the two sexual halves creates an integrated, self-contained sexual whole, a third sexual partner was neither necessary nor desirable. We know that this was Jesus’ reasoning because the only other first-century Jews who shared Jesus’ opposition to more than two persons in a sexual bond were the Essenes, who likewise rejected “taking two wives in their lives” because “the foundation of creation is ‘male and female he created them’ [Gen 1:27]” and because “those who entered [Noah’s] ark went in two by two into the ark [Gen 7:9]” (*Damascus Covenant* 4.20-5.1). The appeal to the “two by two” statement in the story of Noah’s ark is significant because, apart from the repetition of Gen 1:27 in 5:1, that is the only other place where the precise Hebrew phrase *zakar uneqevah* (“male and female”) appears, and there it is strongly linked with the emphasis on a natural pair. The twoness of the sexes is the foundation for the twoness of the sexual bond. There is no other logical or nature-based argument for an absolute rejection of all polyamorous unions—even those unions that are adult-committed and show no scientifically measurable harm—than that the fundamental duality or twoness of the sexes precludes sexual unions involving three or more persons concurrently. In short, according to Jesus, if you think that limiting the number of partners in a sexual union to two persons at any one time is an important requirement for sexual unions, you should regard a male-female requirement as even more important.

There are many other arguments that one can cite as evidence of Jesus’ rejection of homosexual practice, including the fact that the Old Testament that Jesus accepted as Scripture was strongly opposed; that the man who baptized Jesus (John the Baptist) was beheaded for criticizing Herod Antipas for violating Levitical sex laws (the incest prohibitions, even in adult-consensual relationships); that the entirety of early Judaism out of which Jesus emerged believed homosexual practice to be a gross violation of foundational sexual ethics (there are no extant texts within centuries of the life of Jesus indicating any openness to homosexual relationships of any sort, in contrast to the existence of such texts among “pagans”); and that the early church that knew Jesus best was united in its belief that a male-female prerequisite for sexual unions was essential. The supposition of a Jesus supportive of, or even neutral toward, committed homosexual unions is without historical analogue in Jesus’ immediate cultural environment. It is revisionist history at its worst. Moreover, although we have no extant saying of Jesus that loosened the Law’s demand for sexual purity, we do have sayings where Jesus closed remaining loopholes in the Law’s sexual commands by *further intensifying* God’s demand (adultery of the heart; divorce and remarriage) and warning people that sexual impurity could get one thrown into hell full-bodied (Matt 5:27-32). The trend of Jesus’ teaching on sexual ethics is not toward greater license but toward fewer loopholes.

## 2. Eunuchs

*Claim:* The positive treatment that “eunuchs” receive in some biblical texts (Isaiah 56:3-5; Matt 19:12; Acts 8:27-39) provides grounds for supporting homosexual unions, as does Jesus’ attitude toward the woman caught in adultery and toward other outcasts.

***What the evidence really shows:* The references to eunuchs in Isa 56:3-5 and Acts 8:27-39 refer to persons who were physically castrated against their will, not to persons who willingly removed their marks of masculinity, much less actively engaged in sexual relations forbidden by Scripture. Jesus’ saying about eunuchs in Matt 19:12 presupposes that eunuchs are not having sexual intercourse at all, let alone having forbidden sexual intercourse. Both Jesus’ response to the woman caught in adultery and his outreach to sexual sinners was aimed at achieving their repentance so that they might inherit the kingdom of God that he proclaimed.**

Isaiah 39:7 makes clear that the eunuchs mentioned in Isaiah 56:4-5 were Israelites who, against their will, were taken to “the palace of the king of Babylon” and made eunuchs, but had now returned to Israel. According to Isa 56:4-5, God will not cut them off from his people so long as they “choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant.” There is no way that the author would have regarded someone engaged in same-sex intercourse as still pleasing God and holding fast to the covenant. These are persons that had a portion of their masculinity taken away from them against their will. Why should they now be penalized if they do not support erasure of their own masculinity and have no intent to violate any of God’s commands regarding sexual behavior? A first-century Jewish text, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, both extols a eunuch who does not violate God’s commands and condemns homosexual practice (Wisd 3:14; 14:26). Another Jewish work presumes that eunuchs are not having any sexual intercourse (Sirach 20:4; 30:20).

This is exactly what Jesus presumes when he compares “eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God”—that is, Christians who opt out of marriage and choose a celibate life in order to have more time and freedom of movement and action to proclaim the gospel—with “born eunuch” and “made eunuchs.” The analogy only works on the assumption that eunuchs do not have sexual relations. So if “born eunuchs” included for Jesus not only asexual men but also men who had sexual desire only for other males then Jesus rejected for them all sexual relations outside the covenant bond of marriage between a man and a woman. In fact, the whole context for the eunuch saying in Matt 19:10-12 is Jesus’ argument that the twoness of the sexes in complementary sexual pairing, “male and female,” is the basis for rejecting sexual relationships involving three or more persons. He can hardly be dismissing the importance of a male-female requirement for sexual relations immediately after establishing the foundational character of such a requirement—certainly not in Matthew’s view of the matter.

When Jesus rescued the woman caught in adultery from being stoned, he did so with a view to encouraging her repentance. Put simply, dead people don’t repent. Jesus wanted to give the woman every last opportunity to repent so that she might inherit the kingdom of God. So he warned her: “Go and from now on no longer be sinning” (John 8:11). A similar statement is made by Jesus in John 5:14, where it is followed up with the remark: “lest something worse happen to you.” That something worse is loss of eternal life through an unrepentant life. Whereas the Pharisees didn’t care if sexual sinners and persons who exploited the poor for material gain (first-century tax collectors) went to hell, Jesus cared enough to make them a focus of his ministry so that he might, through a proclamation of love and repentance, call them back to God’s kingdom (hence Mark’s summary of Jesus’ ministry: “The kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe the good news” [1:15]). When the church calls to repentance those who engage in homosexual acts and does so lovingly, with a desire to reclaim lives for the kingdom of God, it carries out the work of its Lord.

### 3. Romans 1:24-27 and the Erroneous “Exploitation Argument”

*Claim:* The Bible’s prohibition of homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27 applies only to exploitative and hedonistic forms of homosexual practice such as sex with slaves, prostitutes, and adolescents.

***What the evidence really shows:* Every piece of evidence that can be culled from the text’s literary and historical context confirms that the Bible’s prohibition of homosexual practice, like its prohibition of adult incestuous unions, is absolute, rejecting all forms of homosexual practice regardless of consent and commitment.**

Five lines of evidence make this point clear. First, **Paul in Rom 1:24-27 rejects homosexual practice because it is a violation of the God’s creation of “male and female”** as a sexual pair in Genesis. In Rom 1:23-27 Paul intentionally echoed Gen 1:26-27, making eight points of correspondence, in the same tripartite structure, between the two sets of texts (humans/image/likeness, birds/cattle/reptiles, male/female). Paul was rejecting homosexual practice in the first instance because it was a violation of the male-female prerequisite for sexual relations ordained by the Creator at creation, not because of how well or badly it was done in his cultural milieu.

Second, **the kind of nature argument that Paul employs in Rom 1:18-27 isn’t conducive to a distinction between exploitative and nonexploitative forms** of homosexual practice. For Paul contended that female-female and male-male intercourse was “contrary to nature” because it violated obvious clues given in the material structures of creation that male and female, not two males or two females, are each other’s sexual “counterpart” or “complement” (to use the language of Gen 2:18, 20) in terms of anatomy, physiology, and psychology. What Paul says regarding the vertical vice of idolatry (1:19-23) is equally true of the horizontal vice of same-sex intercourse: male-female complementarity is “clearly seen, being mentally apprehended *by means of the things made*” (1:19-20). Some have argued that the ancients had no comprehension of a complementarity argument. Yet as classicist Thomas K. Hubbard notes in his magisterial sourcebook of texts pertaining to *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome* (University of California Press, 2003): “Basic to the heterosexual position [among Greek and Roman moralists in the first few centuries A.D.] is the characteristic Stoic appeal to the providence of Nature, which has matched and fitted the sexes to each other” (p. 444). Hubbard is supportive of homosexual relationships, yet admits the point.

Third, the fact that Paul in **Rom 1:27 specifically indicts male homosexual relations that involve mutual, reciprocal affections**—“males, having left behind the natural use of the female, were inflamed with their yearning *for one another*”—precludes any supposition that Paul is thinking only of coercive relationships.

Fourth, **Paul’s indictment of lesbianism in Romans 1:26 further confirms that his indictment of homosexual practice is absolute**, since female homosexuality in antiquity was not primarily known, or criticized, for the exploitative practices of sex with slaves, prostitutes, or children. And there can be little doubt that Paul was indicting female homosexuality, as evidenced by: (1) the parallelism of the language of 1:26 (“females exchanged the natural use”) and 1:27 (“*likewise also* the males leaving behind the natural use *of the female*”); (2) the fact that in antiquity lesbian intercourse was the form of female intercourse most commonly labeled “contrary to nature” and paired with male homosexual practice; (3) the fact of nearly universal male opposition to lesbianism in antiquity, even by men engaged in homosexual practice; and (4) the fact that lesbian intercourse was the dominant interpretation of Romans 1:26 in the patristic period.

Fifth, contrary to false claims that people **in the Greco-Roman world** had no concept of committed homosexual unions, **there is plenty of evidence for the conception and existence of**

**loving homosexual relationships**, including semi-official “marriages” between men and between women. Moreover, we know of **some Greco-Roman moralists who acknowledged the existence of loving homosexual relationships while rejecting even these as unnatural** (indeed, we can trace this idea back to Plato’s *Laws*). This is also true of the Church Fathers. For example, Clement of Alexandria (late second century) referred to “women ... contrary to nature ... marrying women” (*Paidagogos* 3.3.21.3). Obviously marriage implies commitment (else there is no need to marry) yet commitment does not change the unnatural and sinful character of the relationship. And it should go without saying that Jewish writers in Paul’s day and beyond rejected all forms of homosexual activity. For example, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus stated the obvious to his Roman readers: “The law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman.... But it abhors the intercourse of males with males” (*Against Apion* 2.199).

It is hardly surprising, then, that even Louis Crompton, a homosexual scholar, acknowledges this point in his massive work, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Harvard University Press, 2003; 500 pgs.). “However well-intentioned,” the interpretation that

Paul’s words were not directed at “bona fide” homosexuals in committed relationships.... seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian. (p. 114)

Also worth noting is the falsity of claims that the ancient world knew nothing akin to our understanding of a homosexual orientation or of congenital influences on at least some homosexual development. As classicist Thomas K. Hubbard (cited above) notes:

Homosexuality in this era [i.e., of the early Imperial Age of Rome] may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation. (p. 386)

Bernadette Brooten, a lesbian New Testament scholar who has written the most important book on lesbianism in antiquity also acknowledges this point. She states that “Paul could have believed” that some persons attracted to members of the same sex “were born that way and yet still condemn them [better: their behaviors] as unnatural and shameful.... I see Paul as condemning *all* forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God” (*Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* [University of Chicago, 1996], 244).

#### 4. Analogies

*Claim:* The closest analogies to the Bible’s opposition to homosexual practice is the Bible’s support for both slavery and the oppression of women and its opposition to divorce, all positions that we now reject.

***What the evidence really shows:* The alleged analogies cited above are far more remote than the analogies of the Bible’s opposition to incest and the New Testament’s opposition to polygamy—behaviors that would disqualify any candidate from ordained office, even when the relationships in question are adult, consensual, committed, and exhibit no scientifically measurable harm.**

Scripture’s opposition to **incest and** (in the New Testament) **polygamy or polyamory** (sexual love for multiple persons concurrently) is related in key ways to its opposition to homosexual

practice. Homosexual practice, incest, and polyamory are all sexual behaviors proscribed absolutely in one or both Testaments of Scripture, despite the fact that all three can be conducted as caring and committed adult sexual relationships. Incest is ultimately prohibited on the grounds that it is sexual intercourse with a person who, in terms of embodied existence, is too much of a same or like on a kinship level (compare Leviticus 18:6: “no one shall approach any *flesh of one’s flesh* to uncover nakedness”). The higher risks of procreative difficulties that attend fertile incestuous unions are merely the symptom of the root problem: too much identity between close blood relations. Similarly the inability of persons of the same sex to procreate is merely the symptom of the root problem: too much embodied identity, here as regards gender or sex, between persons of the same sex. If anything, the identity is more keenly felt in same-sex intercourse than incest since sex or gender is a more integral component of sexuality than blood relatedness. As regards polygamy or polyamory, we have already seen in point 1 above that Jesus predicated his rejection of such behavior on God’s creation of *two* sexes for complementary sexual pairing. So a two-sexes prerequisite for sexual relations and a limitation of the number of persons in a sexual union to two are related as foundation and superstructure (the latter being built on the former). These links indicate that the Bible’s prohibition of incest and the New Testament’s prohibition of multiple-partner sexual unions even for males (note that the Old Testament never allowed women to have multiple husbands concurrently [polyandry]) are very close analogies to the Bible’s strong prohibition of homosexual practice.

**Slavery** is a bad analogy to the Bible’s opposition to homosexual practice because, **first**, the Bible shows no vested interest in preserving slavery but rather at a number of points has a critical edge against slavery (for example, having mandatory release dates, maintaining the right of kin to buy loved ones out of slavery at any time, insisting that fellow Israelites not be treated as slaves). Relative to the slave cultures of the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin, the countercultural thrust of the Scriptures is against slavery. However, as regards a male-female requirement for sexual relations, the Bible’s critical edge and countercultural thrust is decidedly opposed to all homosexual practice. **Second**, whereas race or ethnicity is a 100% heritable, absolutely immutable, and primarily non-behavioral condition, and so inherently benign, homosexual desire is an impulse and, like many impulses, it is not 100% heritable (there may be congenital influences but these are not absolutely deterministic), is open to some change (even if only, in some cases, a limited reduction in the intensity of impulses), is primarily behavioral (here for unnatural, i.e. structurally incompatible, sexual activity), and therefore is *not inherently benign*. **Third**, the parallel with slavery lies with support for homosexual unions, not opposition to such, since those insisting that homosexual desires be affirmed by the church are promoting enslavement to impulses to do what God in Scripture expressly forbids.

The Bible’s stance toward **women’s roles** is a bad analogy for similar reasons. **First**, proposing an analogy between being a woman and having homoerotic impulses confuses categories. Being a woman, unlike a homosexual impulse, is a condition that is 100% congenital, absolutely immutable, and not a direct desire for behavior that Scripture expressly forbids. **Second**, there are plenty of positive views of women in Scripture (e.g., the roles played by Judge Deborah and Ruth in the Old Testament, Jesus’ commendation of female discipleship and Paul’s salute to women coworkers in the New Testament), but only strongly negative assessments of homosexual practice. As with the issue of slavery, the counter-cultural thrust of Scripture leans in the direction both of supporting egalitarian roles for women and of opposing homosexual practice more stringently and consistently than anywhere else in the ancient world.

**Divorce and remarriage after divorce** also have serious problems as analogues to the Bible’s prohibition of homosexual practice, for three reasons. **First**, in Scripture divorce and remarriage is

simply not viewed as bad as homosexual practice. Jesus predicated his opposition to divorce and remarriage on the foundation that God created us as “male and female,” a self-contained sexual pair. The foundation is always more important than the superstructure built on it. Logically it is not possible to justify license in a greater matter by limited license in a lesser matter. For example, it would be illegitimate to argue that greater tolerance toward divorce and remarriage should lead to greater tolerance toward adult-committed incest or “plural” marriages, for the latter two offenses are regarded as more severe. Moreover, there is no virtue to being more consistently disobedient to the will of Christ. **Second**, the Bible shows a limited canonical diversity toward divorce (permitted for men in the Old Testament; in the New Testament allowed in cases of sexual immorality or marriage to an unbeliever who insists on leaving) but no diversity on the matter of homosexual practice. There are also ameliorating factors in the case of some divorce situations that simply don’t apply in the case of a consensual homosexual union. For example, a spouse can be divorced against her or his will or be subject to regular and serious abuse, which creates perpetrator vs. victim distinctions irrelevant to a voluntary entrance into a homosexual union. **Third**, and most importantly, the church’s stance toward divorce/remarriage on the one hand and homosexual practice on the other are alike in this respect: *the church works to end the cycle*. The church would not ordain any candidate for office who expressed the view: “I’ve been divorced and remarried a number of times and would like to continue the cycle with the fewest negative side-effects.” Such a person could not be ordained because that person has an unreformed mind. Why, then, should the church ordain someone who not only engaged in homosexual practice on multiple occasions in the past but also intends to continue in such behavior in a serial, unrepentant way?

Often church proponents of homosexual unions also cite the story in Acts 10-11, 15 about **the church’s inclusion of Gentiles** without requiring circumcision and observance of dietary law. This too is a bad analogy, for many reasons. **First**, a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations is grounded in creation whereas a circumcision requirement and dietary commands are not so grounded. **Second**, whereas circumcision was a Jewish ritual prescription enjoined only on those Gentiles who became proselytes to Judaism, affecting the body only superficially, the Bible’s prohibition of homosexual practice was regarded as a universal moral proscription enjoined on all Gentiles because sexual immorality affects the body holistically. Both Jesus (Mark 7:14-23) and Paul (1 Cor 6:12-20) forbade comparisons between food laws and prohibitions of sexual immorality and yet proponents of homosexual unions continue to make such comparisons. **Third**, whereas Gentile inclusion in the first century was about welcoming Gentile believers while rejecting the sexual behaviors that Scripture categorically regards as immoral, today’s efforts at normalizing homosexual practice are about accepting precisely such behaviors. **Fourth**, whereas Scripture only incidentally links Gentiles to sin (i.e., it recognizes the category of righteous or God-fearing Gentiles), Scripture intrinsically links homosexual practice to sin. **Fifth**, whereas Gentile inclusion has significant Old Testament precedent (for example, the stories of Rahab, Ruth, the widow at Zarephath, Naaman, and Jonah) and uniform New Testament support, homosexual practice is totally rejected in all parts of Scripture. It is absurd to argue for affirmation of homosexual unions as the Spirit’s new work inasmuch as it puts the Spirit at odds with Scripture’s core values in sexual ethics.

**A principle of good analogical reasoning is:** The closest, and thus best, analogies are those that share the most substantive points of contact with the thing being compared. Honest analogical reasoning does not prefer far analogies over close analogies. Consequently, it is inappropriate to stress the alleged analogies of slavery, women’s roles, divorce, and first-century Gentile inclusion while ignoring both the enormous differences with the Bible’s stance on homosexual practice and the more substantive parallels to the Bible’s position on incest and polyamory.

## 5. Significance

*Claim:* The Bible is not particularly interested in homosexual practice as evidenced by the fact that it is only mentioned on a few occasions.

***What the evidence really shows:* All the contextual evidence indicates that ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity viewed homosexual practice of every sort as abhorrent to God, an extreme sexual offense comparable only to the worst forms of adult incest (say, a man and his mother) and superseded among ‘consensual’ sexual offenses only by bestiality.**

A male-female prerequisite is powerfully evident throughout the pages of Scripture. **Every biblical narrative, law, proverb, exhortation, metaphor, and poetry that has anything to do with sexual relations presupposes such a prerequisite.** Even the male-dominated society of ancient Israel imaged itself as Yahweh’s wife so as to avoid any connotation of a marriage between members of the same sex (an image replicated in the New Testament as regards Christ and his bride, the church). There are plenty of laws in the Old Testament delimiting acceptable and unacceptable sexual relationships between a man and a woman but not between two persons of the same sex. The obvious reason: No homosexual relationships were deemed acceptable.

Those who contend that the Bible condemns homosexual practice only in “a handful of passages” at best (Sodom, the prohibitions in Lev 18:22 and 20:13, Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:10) usually neglect a **number of other relevant texts:** the Genesis creation narratives; the Noah and Ham story; the narrative of the Levite at Gibeah; the texts from Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History dealing with cultic figures known to play the female role in sex with men (the *qedeshim*); the interpretation of the Sodom story in Ezekiel, Jude, and 2 Peter; and Jesus’ discussion of marriage in Mark 10 and Matt 19.

More importantly, they overlook **the problem with equating frequency of explicit mention with importance.** Bestiality is mentioned even less in the Bible than homosexual practice and incest gets only comparable treatment, yet who would be so foolish as to argue that Jews and Christians in antiquity would have regarded sex with an animal or sex with one’s mother as inconsequential offenses? Infrequency of mention is often an indicator that the matter in question is foundational rather than insignificant. You don’t have to talk a lot about something that most everyone agrees with and that few persons, if any, violate.

Scripture’s male-female prerequisite for sexual relations and its attendant rejection of homosexual behavior is *pervasive* throughout both Testaments (i.e. it is everywhere presumed in sexual discussions even when not explicitly mentioned); it is *absolute* (i.e. no exceptions are ever given, unlike even incest and polyamory); it is *strongly proscribed* (i.e. every mention of it in Scripture indicates that it is regarded as a foundational violation of sexual ethics); and it is *countercultural* (i.e. we know of no other culture in the ancient Near East or Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin more consistently and strongly opposed to homosexual practice).

It is also **grounded in the creation texts** in Gen 1:27 and 2:21-24. In the latter woman is portrayed as man’s missing element or other half, hence the repeated mention of woman being “taken from” the human and being the human’s “complement” or “counterpart,” a being both “corresponding to” him as a human and “opposite to” him as a distinct sex. Man and woman may become one flesh because out of one flesh man and woman emerged—a beautiful illustration of the transcendent point that man and woman are each other’s sexual counterpart. As noted in issue 1 above, ***Jesus treats the two-sexes requirement for sexual relations as foundational*** for his monogamy principle. And ***Paul cites homosexual practice as a particularly egregious instance of “sexual impurity,” “indecent,” and a “dishonoring”*** of the integrity of maleness and femaleness, an egregious suppression of the obvious facts of God’s design evident in the material structures of creation comparable on the horizontal plane to idolatry on the vertical plane.

If all this doesn’t qualify the Bible’s *male-female requirement for sexual relations* as a core value in Scripture’s sexual ethics (the flipside of which is opposition to all homosexual practice), there is no such thing as a core value in any religious or philosophical tradition.