

## Revisiting Homosexuality in the Holy Bible

Kexin Wu<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430000, China

<sup>a</sup>wukeai036@gmail.com

### Abstract

**This paper aims to deconstruct the conservative religious interpretations that associate homosexuality with morally reprehensible behaviors by reinterpreting biblical narratives and verses about homosexuals and attempts to unveil a more tolerant stance toward homosexuality in the Bible, advocating for the realization of human rights and equal treatment for sexual minorities. Rereading the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, I clarify that the real “sin” in the two cities is the mistreatment of sojourners instead of homosexuality itself. Furthermore, focusing on the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch and Paul’s statements on gender, I delineate the inclusiveness and benevolence towards sexual minorities in the Bible. Finally, I interpret verses related to homosexuality and question some outdated laws found in *Leviticus* dialectically.**

### Keywords

**The Bible; Homosexuality; Sodom and Gomorrah.**

### 1. Introduction

Associating homosexuality with immorality according to the Bible is not uncommon among the Christian Right as well as some religious fundamentalists, attributing it to their belief that the Lord, in the Bible, states that homosexuality is detestable. As a result, their negative sentiments are limited to moral positions, as opposed to social concerns, and their negativity toward homosexuals is equivalent to that toward other sexual minority groups condemned by the Lord according to the Bible. During my investigation into scholarly literature regarding biblical perspectives on homosexuality, I have come across various interpretations that connect homosexuality to abhorrent practices, albeit expressed in a more implicit and nuanced manner. For example, Robert Alter contends that instances of same-sex behavior in the Bible are portrayed as detrimental to the fertility and prosperity of a kingdom, a viewpoint that is largely rejected and condemned by mainstream society (254). Similarly, Christopher Wayne suggests that numerous examinations of biblical references to homosexuality express disapproval of homosexual conduct, with the intention of safeguarding individuals from potentially harmful behaviors (124). In contrast, Alan Sheard challenges Wayne’s perspective by asserting that the Bible does not demonstrate an understanding of homosexual orientation (515). However, while these scholars have made valuable contributions in presenting their perspectives on the biblical references to homosexuality, I noticed a lack of discussion on this issue in a broader context within the Bible, particularly from a critical and dynamic viewpoint.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to reinterpret the biblical narratives and verses of homosexuality, which are commonly perceived as negative, with the aim of unveiling a more tolerant stance within the Bible toward individuals identifying as homosexual. By challenging the conservative religious interpretation that equates homosexuality with abhorrent behaviors, this study endeavors to illuminate a path towards the realization of human rights and equal treatment for sexual minorities in the future. To achieve this goal, the first part of this essay focuses on the reinterpretation of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, aiming to demonstrate

that the real sin of the cities does not lie in the presence of homosexuality but rather in the violent mistreatment of sojourners. The second part delves into the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch as well as Paul's binary statement about gender, unveiling that the inclusiveness and benevolence of the Bible are also shared by sexual minorities. The third part of this essay places significance on a critical reading of scriptures related to homosexuality, adopting a dynamic perspective within a modern context. It seeks to clarify the meaning behind the Lord's reference to homosexuality as an "abomination" and challenges the relevance of certain outdated laws in the book of *Leviticus*, which are widely considered unacceptable in contemporary society.

## 2. The Real Sin of Sodom and Gomorrah

When it comes to the homosexuality mentioned in the Bible, one of the most widely-known accounts is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This story has gained significant prominence due to the connection drawn between the Lord's destruction of these cities and the belief that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah are engaged in homosexual acts, particularly sodomy. Unfortunately, these verbal associations continue to be used by certain religious bigots today as a means to condemn and denounce individuals identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, consequently castigating all forms of homosexual orientations and behaviors (Toensing 61). In fact, the true sin highlighted in Sodom and Gomorrah is not homosexuality itself, but rather the abhorrent mistreatment of resident aliens and sojourners, manifested through the intention of sexual humiliation and rape towards Lot's guests, which are often intertwined with the broader context of wickedness.

In the *Book of Genesis*, the men of Sodom call to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them. Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly' " (Genesis 19.5 ). This part of the scripture is usually literally interpreted by fundamentalists and always related to the sin of the city Sodom and Gomorrah. To figure out the real sin of the cities causing the annihilation, it is necessary to reinterpret the scripture carefully as a whole in all of Bible's multiple and diverse voices by explaining the expression "to know" and "wickedly" here. Scholarship on this story has long pointed out that the word "know" in Hebrew has multiple meanings, including the most common one simply signifying "to know" as well as a less frequently meaning "to interrogate" and "to have sex with" ( Toensing 68) . Apart from that, Lot tries to negotiate with those mobs by substituting the two male guests with his daughters. "Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof " (Genesis 19.8). Apparently, Lot wants to save the guests with his virginal daughters. Therefore, it is obvious that the word "know" in this context means "Let us know them intimately, sexually," and in this case, violently.

Analyzing the denotation and connotation of "to know" will provide a more profound understanding of the nature in the wickedness mentioned by Lot and, furthermore, the real sin of the cities. Martti Nissinen highlights that in accordance with Middle Assyrian laws, if one man rapes another man, the perpetrator will be subject to punishment for engaging in a deliberate act of disgrace, specifically by forcing the other man into a passive role (25). However, it is important to note that during that time, the rape of a man by another man of lower social status, such as a defeated enemy, may have been considered legal. Moreover, Morschauser suggests a plausible scenario in which the men of Sodom suspected that Lot's guests might be enemy spies from the kingdoms recently conquered by Abram (465). In this context, the intention of the men in Sodom is to humiliate the two guests through violent sexual acts, similar to the way in which enemies are raped. Thus, the emphasis in this story lies not on the sinful homosexuality of the

men in Sodom and Gomorrah, but rather on the use of violence to demonstrate power and dominance over male sojourners or outsiders, which the text labels as “wickedness”. A similarity might be seen in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in that the angels are messengers from the Lord and the men of Sodom and Gomorrah wish to attack them, Their intention is to assert their power over these divine agents, thereby displaying the supposed superiority of foreign gods over the God of Abram (Toensing 70). This suggests that the actions of the men in Sodom and Gomorrah may reflect the prevalent arrogance and idolatry that permeated the cities on the plain, not limited to a specific act of homosexuality. Apart from that, in *Ezekiel*, a section of text also provides a significant clue for a better understanding of the sin of Sodom. “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were over fed . . . they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me” (Ezekiel 16.49). In *the Book of Genesis*, we witness the unwavering integrity of Lot, a courageous and accommodating man who stands up against the sinful city for its discrimination and sexual violence toward the guests. In contrast, from this scripture of *Ezekiel*, we notice that the sin of the city Sodom is not solely attributed to homosexuality but its arrogance and inhospitality to the alien residents from the distance especially when they are vulnerable and in need of assistance.

By examining the above aspects, it becomes evident that the condemnation within the Bible centers more on acts of violence and abuse, rather than on the consensual expressions of same-sex relationships. This perspective helps to build a more logical and convincing argument regarding the true nature of the narrative surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah.

### 3. Christian Inclusiveness and Benevolence of Homosexuality

By reevaluating the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah, it becomes clear that the punishment inflicted by the Lord is not specifically due to the homosexual orientation of the men in those cities. Instead, it is a result of their violent behavior, arrogance, and lack of hospitality towards strangers. Moreover, within the Bible, we can observe a sense of Christian inclusiveness and benevolence reflected in its tolerant attitude towards homosexuality. This is evident through instances such as the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch, who represents a marginalized outsider, as well as the positive affirmations of homosexuality found in Paul’s words.

In *the Book of Acts*, the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch is a powerful counter-voice that values inclusion and acceptance of someone who, in today’s context, might have some parallels with the transgender community. The apostle Philip does not hesitate to allow the Ethiopian eunuch to baptize, as the eunuch asks, “Here’s a pool of water on the side of the road. What is prevent me from being baptized, from becoming a full member of this community?” (Acts 8.36). Significantly, Philip does not interrogate the eunuch about his sexual practices or rejects him with the excuse of his disqualification but just welcomes him on the spot, presenting an inclusive and tolerant attitude of Christians. In addition, it is also worth noting that “Ethiopian” here is a shorthand for anyone from with dark skin. A eunuch is a man who works on a royal court and has undergone ritual castration so that he can serve the monarchy without posing the threat of producing male heirs who can usurp the throne. At that time, eunuchs in Judaism of were often marginalized and excluded from full membership in society as they faced various ritual prohibitions and were disregarded by the majority of the community. By this definition, this Ethiopian eunuch has a dual identity of being an outsider yet still be accepted by Christianity without being humiliated or insulted.

As an early piece of Christian correspondence in which Paul is describing what the afterlife is like, *the Book of Galatians* manifests a kind of Christian benevolence toward all the people of the God by erasing all the boundaries and distinctions that we may put up among ourselves in

modern society. For instance, Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3.29). The assimilation of biological sex in this verse may confound many of us since we live in a world where the God actually distinguishes females from males, which affects what kind of marriage we have today. In reality, what the Bible says is much more complicated than that.

It is about the unity and equality found in Christ Jesus, transcending societal divisions based on ethnicity, social status, and even gender. It does not dismiss the existence of biological sex or its significance in our world but rather emphasizes an inclusive spiritual reality where all believers are united in their relationship with Christ. This scripture lists two contrasting pairs including "male and female", together with "slave or free". When Paul says that "there is neither Jew or Greek, male or female, or slave and free", he is not saying that the differences do not exist but that, in Christ, they do not matter. In Christ, it does not matter about one's ethnic identity, gender or station in society for anyone embraces Christ, they become part of God's chosen people and are entitled to inherit all the promises that God has bestowed. It is only through Christ that anyone can inherit God's kingdom (John 14.6). Although ethnic, gender, and social distinctions may continue to carry significance in various contexts, they do not impact one's status as a child of God through faith in Christ.

In this respect, it is noticeable that God's inclusiveness and benevolence is shared by all his people regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation, presenting a tolerant attitude to the sexual minority group including homosexuals.

#### 4. Necessity for Critical and Dynamic Interpretations of the Bible

The third book mentioning homosexuality is *Leviticus*, which contains numerous laws and regulations about holiness and faith in God. However, it is important to understand that *Leviticus* is not intended to be a rigid rule book that must be strictly followed in a static manner, as the Law's time has come to an end and is fulfilled in the single commandment to love. Additionally, interpretations of the Bible are evolving to reflect the changing historical and social contexts we live in.

Some Christians who hold homophobic views often invoke *Leviticus* in the Bible to condemn homosexuality, asserting that it is an abomination that cannot be accepted within the Christian faith. This is typically based on two verses from *Leviticus* that frequently come up in the discussion on the topic. One verse states, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Leviticus 18.22), while the other declares, "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" (Leviticus 20.13). It is important to understand these verses within the historical and cultural contexts, and to understand some general points about this section of *Leviticus*, recognizing that interpretations of the Bible are open to ongoing discussion and evolution. These verses from *Leviticus* are often understood in the context of distinguishing the Jewish people from their strange neighbors who adhere to different belief systems, highlighting the significance of Jewish purity in all aspects of daily life. The prohibition of homosexual behavior is just one aspect of this broader holiness code. It is worth noting that in the surrounding cultures, same-sex activity is often associated with temple worship and pagan rituals, specifically through male shrine prostitutes engaged in sexual acts as part of worship to pagan gods and goddesses (Töyräänvuori 236). In this particular context, it is plausible to infer that what the Lord finds abominates is not homosexuality itself, but the pagan religious ritual that involves homosexual intercourse. In this regard, Christians are not obligated to obey these verses in the same manner as orthodox Jews, as the time of the Law has come to an end with the arrival of the Messiah Jesus, who brings the law of love. Hence, it does not matter whether

an individual identifies as male or female, homosexual or heterosexual. The crucial aspect lies in the actions one takes, which should be guided by love.

Similarly, other laws are also aimed at distinguishing Jewish people from pagans, which means that Christians in modern society do not have to strictly follow all the rules of *Leviticus*. Typical examples include verses such as “And so eating the wrong food makes you less holy” (Leviticus 20.25), “Having a tattoo makes you less holy” (19.28), “Wearing clothes from different fibers—like wool and linen together – makes you less holy” (19.19). Indeed, there are a great number of rules in Bible that judge people’s faithfulness to God. However, not all of these rules are righteous, and it would be unwise to blindly follow every static rule without discernment or thinking critically. Apparently, certain laws of God have become obsolete and not applicable in modern society since we human beings have been striving for centuries to challenge and overcome the inhumane aspects of biblical laws, together with the critical, dynamic, and developing interpretations of the Bible that adapt to the ever-changing historical and social background.

Last but not least, we’ve made so much progress regarding our understanding of homosexuality, and all the efforts we’ve made these years are seeking the well-being of people. In fact, the interpretations of the Bible can be multiple and diverse but ultimately should be beneficial to human beings’ felicities and shall evermore remain so. Therefore, it makes no more sense to condemn Christians who are gay as practicing abomination than it does Christians who “sport tattoos, wear mixed fibers, or eat ham and cheese sandwiches”.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the reinterpretation of the biblical scriptures, this paper discovers and highlights the tolerant attitude in the Bible toward homosexuality. By examining the true nature of the sin in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the association of vileness with homosexuality has been challenged. Additionally, the case of the first queer Christian convert of color serves as a compelling example of Christian inclusiveness and benevolence towards sexual minorities. Furthermore, by analyzing the historical background of the holiness code verses, the notion of homosexuality as an abomination has been refuted, calling for critical and dynamic interpretations of the Bible. By doing so, this paper aims to shed light on the society where some people still base their values and moral standards on these old biblical scriptures, which perpetuate discrimination and harassment against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals today. It is hoped that this research will contribute towards fostering a more inclusive and accepting society that embraces all sexual orientations and gender identities.

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