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David F. Wright

Homosexuality: The Relevance of the Bible

The subject of homosexuality is very much at the forefront of Christian ethical discussion at the present time. Some of the debate is highly technical, and Mr Wright has entered into it elsewhere (see n. 4) to correct mistaken interpretations. We are grateful to him for this essay written at a more popular level; it was originally presented as a Seminar at Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, and is printed as delivered.

It has become almost a commonplace in the contemporary discussion of homosexuality—whether ethical, theological or ecclesiastical-disciplinary—that the Bible has little or no direct or specific light to cast on our modern problems. This verdict may be illustrated by the words of Robin Scroggs:

Not only is the New Testament church uninterested in the topic, it has nothing new to say about it . . . *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate.*¹

This broad position, which is standard fare in liberal writing, may be said to rest on a single conviction—that the biblical texts are invariably found to be talking about or alluding to only something quite different from what poses the real dilemmas today. The difference may vary from text to text, but the points of reference or concern to the biblical writers do not match ours.

This paper seeks to challenge this consensus, or at least to put some sharp questions to it, by means of a re-examination of the main texts and of the processes of reasoning commonly applied to them. In the bygoing it should provoke discussion about the criteria or methods whereby we assess the relevance of biblical material to present-day issues. For convenience I will follow the biblical order—which does not imply importance or priority. Each text of course merits extended exegesis, which it is impossible to provide in this context.

¹ *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia 1983), 101, 127.

Genesis 19—the Sodom Story

The non-sexual interpretation (pioneered by D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, 1955, and borrowed, often slavishly, by a number of later writers) has had a far longer innings than it deserves, and is now rarely put into bat. It was perhaps an inevitable and needed corrective. But how do we know what the Sodomites wanted to do to Lot's guests, and whether they sinned in so wanting? Bailey and others have made much of the fact that references to their misconduct and fate elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. Ezk. 16:46ff) never explicitly mention their homosexual gang rape but only their neglect of the poor, inhospitality, etc. It was the intertestamental literature that brought out the homosexual interpretation, which became ubiquitous in Hellenistic Judaism.

But what should surprise us in this? It was only when Judaism encountered homosexuality in the Greek world, chiefly in the form of pederasty, that it became more than a marginal issue. Homosexuality scarcely surfaced as a domestic concern in Israel—or in rabbinic Judaism, for that matter. By what criterion should the interpretation of a passage be determined by the rest of the biblical tradition's interest in it? It is not as though the sexual reading is excluded by any subsequent comment.

This is not to minimize the importance of the revisionist treatment of the passage. Much more was wrong with the Sodomites than homosexuality, and perhaps much that was more reprehensible. The language of 'sodomy' is indefensible. But this consideration cannot be allowed to exorcize the sexual element from the text, or make it morally equivocal.

The same would need to be said to the argument that what was damnable in the Sodomites' endeavour was not its homosexuality as such but the violence of its homosexuality—the attempted rape.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

The textual meaning here is not in dispute. Although the precise physical form of homosexual intercourse may not be certainly identifiable, no body of opinion claims that this is at issue—as though what is banned is only a posit in parallel to heterosexual congress, but not necessarily other forms, such as anal intercourse.

Two reasons are commonly advanced for limiting the scope of the Levitical law—the ritual context of the Holiness Code, and the cultic context of the proscription of Egyptian or Canaanite

religion. They may be two sides of the same coin, and are in any case not easily separable. The claim is made that the prohibition is no more of general reference or lasting import than the ban on cutting your beard in a certain way (19:27) or making a garment out of two different materials (19:19) or intercourse during menstruation (18:19) and so on. Since we no longer entertain similar notions of ritual impurity or are faced with homosexual behaviour associated with heathen idolatry, this part of the Mosaic law has nothing to say to the permanent-loving-preference type of homosexuality.

The argument has to recognize that many other unambiguously sinful acts are also encompassed by the Levitical code, such as bestiality (18:23) and child sacrifice (18:21), the immediate neighbours of 18:22, and adultery (20:10) and incest (18:6ff). These chapters undoubtedly place a great mixture of activity and conduct under the ban, but is there no way of discriminating between the more and less grave?

Another way to pose the issue is to ask whether the Mosaic law reprobed behaviour simply because the Canaanites indulged in it. This would presumably mean that it condemned everything the Canaanites did, which is scarcely a tenable possibility.² Is it not eminently more reasonable to argue that the Canaanites' cultic homosexual prostitution (if that is what it was) provided a further reason for avoiding Canaanite religion—because homosexual relations were unacceptable on more fundamental grounds than their contextual association with pagan cult? After all, the Israelites did not need, one assumes, to be informed about the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice before they could know whether it was permissible for them to dispose of their children in this way. To put it another way, is it conceivable, from what else we know about Mosaic or Israelite ethics, that child sacrifice or homosexuality would have been tolerated if disinfected of their Canaanite associations?

In any case, the argument goes on, the whole of the Levitical legislation lapsed in the Christian church:

It would simply not have occurred to most early Christians to invoke the authority of the old law to justify the morality of the new: the Levitical regulations had no hold on Christians and are manifestly irrelevant in explaining Christian hostility to gay sexuality.³

² See G. Wenham, 'Homosexuality in the Bible', in Tony Higon (ed.), *Sexuality and the Church* (Hockley, Essex, 1987), 31.

³ J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago, 1980), 105.

This sounds like a historical statement (i.e. rather than an assertion of what they should have done, on theological or ethical grounds). In the context it considerably underestimates the early Christian citation or appeal to the two verses in question.⁴ It also misses a weightier consideration which I will raise below.

Romans 1:26–27

Two or three main arguments are commonly advanced against discerning here a permanent position for Christian ethics to adopt. For many interpreters, Paul's diatribe is merely preformed tradition, typical of the strictures passed on the immoral world by Hellenistic moralists such as Philo and Plutarch. It is entirely conventional, contributes nothing distinctively Christian, and may tell us little about the behaviour of real people in Paul's day.

Others discount the passage by highlighting, as with Leviticus (and the two cases are often felt to reinforce each other), the links between idolatry and perverse sexuality. Even if it is not cultic prostitution that is in view, Paul is indicting activity that issues from corrupt religious roots (vv. 23,25). His horizon does not extend beyond the consequences of worshipping creatures rather than the creator. He is surely not saying anything of the highly moral homosexual monogamy of faithful Christians.

And if you attempt to counter this disqualification by drawing attention to Paul's argument from nature, the reply comes back that it is a very versatile, not to say slippery or devious, device in Paul's hands: does not 'nature' teach us that long hair is degrading for a man (1 Cor. 11:14)? Nature may be nothing more than convention, fashion, common use and wont. Paul is not propounding an argument from natural law or even a conviction based on the doctrine of the creation of human nature, male and female.

John Boswell's ingenuity delivers a further coup de grâce. Paul has in view only those individuals who abandoned their own natural dispositions in order to engage in same-sex behaviour—contrary to *their* nature. They are in fact heterosexuals who defy their own heterosexuality.⁵ This interpretation has not been without its followers, but need detain us least of all. Its atomistic concept of nature seems to me to require a highly contrived, not to say esoteric, reading of the passage. It also entails in Paul an

⁴ For the evidence see my article 'Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἀρσενοκοίται (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)', in *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984), 125–53.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 108–12.

awareness of the difference between homosexual and heterosexual natures that most students of the subject find nowhere in antiquity. It would enable one to distinguish between two types of homosexual practitioners—in Bailey's terms, between perverts and inverts.

What few have sufficiently weighed is Paul's linking together of male and female same-sex conduct. What is for us an instinctive association was very rare in antiquity, not least because female homosexuality is rarely mentioned.⁶ Prior to Paul I know of only two writers who subject them to common condemnation—Plato and Ps-Phocylides.⁷ Scroggs, who makes much of the character of the Pauline material as merely 'preformed tradition', is aware of the difficulty of pointing to any relevant 'preformed tradition' in this case, but is not thereby deterred.

The linkage has implications beyond the question of Paul's originality, to which we shall return. It bears also on his meaning, for the parallelism strongly suggests that Paul gives us something like a generic condemnation of homosexuality. This is to say, he sees beyond particular forms of same-sex relations or same-sex relations in particular contexts to what it is that enables one to lump both female and male conduct together. For if, as most scholars hold, the only pattern of male homosexuality that Paul could have known or dreamt of was pederasty, there is no counterpart on the female side. From what we know of the latter, the arguments used to limit Paul's animadversions to pederasty and so to disenfranchise it cannot be applied to the unnatural relations of woman with woman.

Indeed, the equivalence in Romans 1 bids us not be so dismissive towards Paul's appeal to nature. This is assuredly a widespread category in the moral writers of the Hellenistic era, particularly as a result of the influence of Stoicism. But the allusions in the chapter to divine creation (vv. 20,25) justify us in believing that the argument from nature has to be taken with great seriousness. In my view its force is not lessened by invoking the active/aggressive v. passive/receptive form of gender expectations to which it often gave rise. What has to be shown (and I firmly believe the *onus probandi* lies on this interpretation) is that Paul did not believe that male and female were created for each with complementary sexualities grounded in the distinctive constitutions of their sexual organs.

⁶ See Scroggs, *op cit.*, 140–4, and B. Brooten, 'Patristic Interpretations of Romans 1:26', *Studia Patristica* 18:1 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1985), 287–91.

⁷ Cf. Scroggs, 131, 141.

Before advancing certain more general considerations pertinent to Romans 1 we must turn to the last textual evidence to be considered.

1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10

We have in fact already passed in review the major factors that lead many commentators to refuse to allow any abiding ethical significance in the occurrences in these two verses of the Greek term *arsenokoitēs*.

For Scroggs and his ilk, Paul and the Paulinist have simply taken over a conventional vice-list from the moral literature of Hellenistic Judaism or even secular Hellenistic writers. As such it tells us nothing in detail about his attitude to particular forms of behaviour; it serves merely to convey a generalized outlook on society. It bears little or no relation to the kind of people the Corinthian Christians may previously have been, or indeed to the ills of their Corinthian milieu. Its "traditional form . . . forbids an assessment in terms of the contemporary scene, as if, for example, we had to do with a realistic description of conditions in Corinth".⁸

The tradition determines that Paul could have in mind only the particular form of male homosexuality that was culturally dominant, namely pederasty, as analysed by Kenneth Dover and others. It is to the undesirable features of that kind of relationship that *arsenokoitēs* refers, and not in principle to same-sex intercourse. Some writers, including Scroggs, believe that we can more closely define the meaning of the term. Both of its uses condemn very specific forms of pederasty; 1 Timothy has in view 'the enslaving of boys or youths for sexual purposes, and the use of these boys by adult males', and 1 Corinthians condemns only 'the active partner who keeps the *malakos* (effeminate call-boy) as a "mistress" or who hires him on occasion to satisfy his sexual desires'.⁹ Scroggs holds in particular that insufficient regard has been had by historians to homosexual prostitution, which enables us to interpret the *arsenokoitēs* as an exploitative, aggressive participant in this commerce. I think Scroggs is entangled in a deep inconsistency—between identifying the Pauline vice-lists as essentially 'preformed tradition' and discerning in the two occurrences of *arsenokoitēs* not only surprisingly precise forms of pederasty but two different expressions of it. The two elements in

⁸ H. Conzelmann, *I Corinthians (Hermeneia)*; Philadelphia, 1975), 101.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, 108.

his case are linked together by such profound analytic insights as the following: 'it is not hard to imagine that Paul's basic attitude toward pederasty could have been seriously influenced by passing a few coiffured and perfumed call-boys in the marketplace'.¹⁰ Chacun à sa imagination!

Professor Boswell is almost alone in questioning whether anything homosexual is involved in this Greek term at all. He concludes that it denotes 'male sexual agents, i.e. active male prostitutes, who were common throughout the Hellenistic world in the time of Paul',¹¹ who may have serviced male or female clients. He reaches this position by construing the word in a manner calculated to evoke from classical linguists only scornful derision. It does not mean 'those (males) who lie with males' but 'males who lie with' others, whether male or female. Compounds of *arren*—when spelt with *rs* instead of *rr* make it the subject or qualifier of the second element, not its object. This is patent nonsense; the difference is purely dialectal.¹²

What Boswell and many other writers (but not Scroggs) have failed to notice is the significance of Paul's choice of *arsenokoitai*, which is not attested before 1 Corinthians. Whether Paul coined it we cannot tell, but it is certainly a coinage of Hellenistic Christianity or Judaism. What should by now have occasioned more surprise is that, if Paul or his source wanted to condemn pederasty, he did not use one of the many words or phrases currently in common use to refer to it. Instead he employed a new term—and one fashioned on the basis of those Levitical prohibitions:

meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynaikos (18:22)
koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos (20:13)

One clearly need look no further for the inspiration of this Jewish or Christian neologism. Scroggs recognizes this (although he inclines, in my view implausibly, to seeing the Greek term as the equivalent of the rabbis' semi-technical phrase based on Leviticus—*mishkav (b)zakur*, but the difference between us is not great at this point). But he then devises for the word a meaning that forgets its provenance. Boswell's eccentric etymology at least has this much in its favour, that it faces up to the word itself.

Confirmation of the derivation of the word from the LXX of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 344.

¹² See my extended refutation in the article cited in n. 4 above, and my paper 'Early Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality' forthcoming in *Studia Patristica*, for a broader critique of Boswell's handling of patristic material.

Leviticus comes from what is probably its next occurrence, in the *Sibylline Oracles* 2:73. Here it is found in what may be one of the Christian interpolations of the Jewish base, but it is more likely to be of Jewish origin, for it appears in a section closely related to the Hellenistic-Jewish gnomic wisdom collection known as the *Sentences* of Ps-Phocylides, although *arsenokoitēs* itself does not occur in the latter. Ps-Phocylides, according to its latest editor, originated in Alexandria roughly between 30 BC and AD 40. The relevant part of the collection, which appears in very similar form in the *Sibylline Oracles*, betrays heavy Levitical influence.

Now no-one claims that Leviticus had pederasty in mind! Paul has in fact adopted or fashioned a term which is little more than a substantival transcript from Leviticus (LXX) and which speaks simply of males sleeping with males. Oddly enough, despite the liberal consensus, the New Testament at no point obviously refers to pederasty at all. It might be overarguing to claim that Paul in his choice of language seems to have deliberately avoided the plethora of terms current to denote pederasty, but if he had wanted to condemn only pederasty, let alone only the highly specific vices detected by Scroggs, he went a very odd way about it.

It may be thought that this argument is too etymological, recalling the shades of Kittel and the pre-Barr era. It is true of course that had Paul used an explicitly pederastic word, it would not have followed that he meant by it solely pederasty. For so dominant was the pederastic form of homosexuality that its vocabulary had come to refer to other forms, almost generically. Thus Hellenistic Jewish writers like Philo talk about the Sodomites as pederasts. This usage has persisted even to the present day; cf. our 'rent-boys', who are normally adults. The early medieval penitential literature similarly speaks of adult partners in homosexuality as 'boys'. My argument from *arsenokoitēs* does not stand alone, but forms a double cord with the distinctiveness of Romans 1:26-27.

In particular, the argument that Paul is merely retailing preformed tradition is decidedly shaky. Scroggs persists in it despite the fact that he cannot point to any source that Paul may be presumed to have known which combines a condemnation of both male and female homosexuality in the manner of Romans 1. Nor is the situation with the vice-lists quite so clear-cut with respect to the Pauline verses. Many a commentator claims that the vices itemized in these two verses derive from the common content of many such lists, but hardly anyone provides firm evidence to back this up. The exegete's and the translator's

quandary over *arsenokoitēs* arises in part precisely from the lack of plain parallels in lists earlier than 1 Corinthians.¹³

It need not be a corollary of derivation from conventional moralistic wisdom that Paul/the Paulinist is not addressing a concrete context in these letters. The selection made from pre-existing vice-catalogues may reflect the writer's awareness of the local problems or the social composition of the church.¹⁴ Is it in any case a sound or reasonable deduction from the use of traditional material that its user cannot be directing or adapting it to a live audience or real-life situation? This is a useful point at which to draw out some general considerations in conclusion.

General Considerations

How can we determine, if Paul does not use specific language, that he has only specific abuses in view? Such an assertion is in effect the stance of Scroggs *et multi alii*, although it has too often rested on inadequate linguistic analysis. One might ask the converse: if a writer attacks pederasty in an unmistakable manner but uses the vocabulary of 'male' rather than 'boy', would we again be required to conclude that his hostility was without prejudice to his estimate of any other form of homosexuality? I have argued that the distinctiveness of both the word *arsenokoitēs* and the content of Romans 1:26–27 at least *prima facie* reveals Paul extrapolating from the particular to the general. Why should the fact that the only form of homosexuality Paul could have known about at all directly was pederasty, whether involving prostitution or not, be allowed to dictate the conclusion, in the face of linguistic evidence to the contrary, that he could not have been passing a broader judgment, and that his opinion of other patterns of homosexuality is quite indeterminable?

My rebuttal of such a position is twofold: not only has insufficient regard been taken of the precise originality of Paul's statements, but also inadequate heed been paid to what else we know of Paul's mind, which is neither so inaccessible that we may father upon him some of the wilder speculations found in this area of discussion, nor so 'cribbed, cabined and confined' by the phenomena of contemporary society that he was incapable of

¹³ Cf. Conzelmann's silence *ad loc.* (102) on the occurrence of this particular term in other lists.

¹⁴ See an argument to this effect for 1 Cor. 6 by P. Zaas, '1 Corinthians 6:9ff: Was Homosexuality Condoned in the Corinthian Church?', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* II:17 (Chico, CA, 1979), 205–12.

formulating a moral judgment with a reach beyond the immediately observable. I find it quite inconceivable, from what else I know of Paul's mind, e.g. on the significance of the one-flesh heterosexual union, that he could have countenanced any model of same-sex genital relationship. This assessment of mine (which I merely summarize rather than substantiate at length) confirms me in my conclusions drawn from a close analysis of Paul's particular statements. Scrogg's failure is partly one of inadequate scrutiny of the trees and partly one of missing the wood for the trees.

A final issue concerns the question of originality in another sense. What if we decide that Paul has nothing to say about homosexuality that goes beyond the wisdom of the Old Testament and later Judaism? Does it devalue his strictures if they display nothing distinctively Christian? I leave aside here the question whether nothing of a distinctively Christian kind about homosexuality can be deduced from what Paul says elsewhere about sexual relations (e.g. in 1 Corinthians 6). My answer to my own question will not be hard to predict, for I have discerned special significance precisely in the fact that in *arsenokoitēs* Paul deliberately sided with the Levitical ban. But quite apart from this, Conzelmann's comment is pertinent:

The fact that Christianity takes over the Jewish ethic must be theologically understood. Christianity regards itself not as a new system of ethics, but as a practical exercise of the will of the long-known God.¹⁵

While I doubt if this can be viewed as wholly satisfactory as a generalization, Christianity's adoption of Jewish ethical attitudes should not of itself be treated as somehow sub-Christian or negligible. Plenty of evidence from antiquity could be advanced to show that you did not have to be Jewish, or even Stoic, let alone Christian, to condemn pederasty as contrary to nature. Why should Christianity's sharing of common ground with earlier traditions be sufficient cause not to take it seriously?

What price originality? I conclude that Paul's lay partly in being unoriginal. Although Paul said remarkably little about homosexuality (which may in itself be open to varying hypothetical explanations), what he does say reveals a remarkable originality, in part by adopting the broader perspectives of the tradition that derived from the Old Testament and from Leviticus in particular.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 101.