

Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

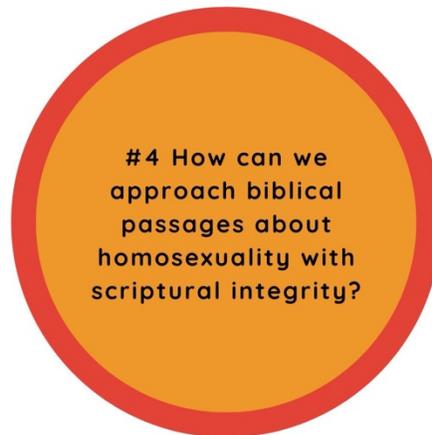
Circle #4

Part B

“How Can We Approach Biblical Passages About Homosexuality with Scriptural Integrity?”

Rev. Dale R. Cohen

Fig. 4.1



In the previous paper, Circle #4, Part A, I dealt with four of the seven Scripture passages related to homosexuality. In this article, Part B, I'll deal with the two biblical passages from Leviticus, and next week I'll cover Romans 1:26-27 in Circle #4, Part C.

Note: I originally intended to cover the Leviticus passages and the Romans passage in this paper; however, due to the amount of material, I have decided to hold the Romans passage until next week.

As stated before, these papers do not attempt to change anybody's mind or viewpoint on human sexuality. I trust you to decide for yourself what you believe; however, I am simply answering the question:

If someone believes homosexuality is not inherently sinful, how can they justify this view with what the Bible says?

I noted in Paper 4A some preliminary issues for consideration in approaching these texts, like the need for caution in overlaying modern words onto ancient texts. There is also difficulty translating words from the Bible's original languages that don't appear in other ancient texts for analysis and comparison.

As we approach the Leviticus Scriptures, another critical consideration is that the writers of the Bible had a limited understanding of biology and psychology compared to today. We cannot make assumptions about ancient texts as if the people writing them knew what we know now. How many of us would go to a doctor who only practiced medicine using the medical knowledge, tools, and practices generally available in the first century? I hope none of us! The New Testament is almost two thousand years old, and the Old Testament is even older. Hopefully, our understanding of God and his relationship with us has grown with time, experience, and additional Godly-inspired insights. God hasn't changed; however, our "*capacity*" to understand and experience God has increased as we've built upon the faith of our forebears.

Another consideration for working with these Scriptures is the biblical writers' one-dimensional view of human sexuality. The assumption was that everybody was heterosexual (*a word for which there is no ancient Hebrew equivalent*). They presumed if anybody engaged in same-sex relations, they did so in conflict with their "*natural*" heterosexuality. It followed then that same-sex acts were an "*unnatural*" expression of an assumed universal opposite-sex attraction.

For thousands of years, the assumption of universal heterosexuality and what is natural has continued to influence how people react to homosexuality – often with suspicion or disgust. Even some people who now see themselves as homosexual were repulsed at the first awareness of their homosexuality because the norms most of us grew up with conditioned us to react negatively.

Consider that if a person is heterosexual, it would be "*unnatural*" for them to be attracted to a person of the same sex. Likewise, it's also true that if a person is homosexual, it would be equally "*unnatural*" for them to be attracted to a person of the opposite sex. A complex combination of biology, psychology, and life experiences contribute to sexual attraction, resulting in a circular debate about what "*causes*" homosexuality, like the arguments surrounding nature versus nurture. (See the 2019 study, "*Large-scale GWAS reveals insights into the architecture of same-sex behaviors*," <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aat7693>)

The ancient Hebrews also had a limited understanding of the human reproductive system, which influenced many of their beliefs, and several laws developed around these misunderstandings. Old Testament laws regulated responses to male nocturnal emissions (*wet dreams*), semen-spilling (*masturbation or withdrawal during coitus*), or any sexual activity that did not produce human life (see *Deuteronomy 23:10, Leviticus 15:16-18, and Genesis 38:6-10*). The Hebrews and other people from that time believed the critical component of procreation was the male "*seed*" or sperm. Therefore, "*wasting seed*" violated the law and was seen as comparable to murder. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, the Israelites needed to quickly populate their new homeland (*and "birth" an army to protect themselves from their larger and stronger enemies*). Same-sex relations between males were forbidden because these interactions released the seed

that produced life without producing a child, thus delaying the strengthening of their nation.

If homosexuality is a “*bad*” thing, why didn’t the Old Testament condemn lesbianism—the female form of homosexuality? Some contend that the Old Testament does not explicitly condemn homosexuality—it condemns the “*wasting of the seed*” necessary for populating a nation. The Old Testament law expressed no prohibition for female same-sex interactions because the Israelites assumed no “*seed*” was lost whenever women had same-sex relations; therefore, no ban was necessary.

We see the issue of “*wasting seed*” in other biblical prohibitions. Leviticus lists several laws against having sex with a menstruating woman, touching her bed linens during that time, or sleeping in the same bed with her. If, by being close to her, the man became aroused, it might lead to sexual intercourse, which during menstruation would make procreation, although not impossible, less likely. These boundaries, if kept, ensured the preservation of the man’s seed for a more suitable time for procreation. You can see how this limited understanding of human reproduction permeated the law and influenced the rejection of any form of sexual contact that could not produce a child.

Ancient people were unaware of the role of the female egg in procreation. That’s why some of the rhetoric surrounding pregnancy is still dismissive of the woman’s role. For instance, a woman “*carries*” the baby in her womb as if her body were merely a repository. Or worse, some people refer to a pregnant woman as having a baby in the “*oven*,” as if she simply provides a warm atmosphere for the baby to grow. This slight diminishes the necessity of her egg in procreation and the life-giving nourishment her body provides as the fetus develops into human life.

If a marriage failed to produce a baby, the woman bore most of the embarrassment and shame because no one considered the possibility of male infertility. If there was a seminal discharge (*notably different from ejaculating sperm, although the Hebrews didn’t understand this*), people assumed her husband’s “*contribution*” was all that was necessary for pregnancy. So, people presumed that if a woman was “*barren*,” another negative stereotype, it was God’s punishment for her sins. In other words, it was all her fault.

Failure to procreate was also grounds for divorce or for a man to lawfully take a second wife who could bear him a child. Again, procreation was the primary goal of sexual relations in settling a new land, and failure to produce a child was letting the nation of Israel down. This projection of shame on the woman is an unfortunate burden that unconsciously and insidiously remains today, continuing centuries of psychological harm to women.

These misconceptions (*no pun intended*) about reproductive science played a considerable role in matters related to sexuality in ancient Jewish law. With these cultural limitations in mind, let's look at the two Levitical passages:

The Holiness Code in Leviticus

The passages from Leviticus are part of Israel's Holiness Code (*the Code*), regulations for holy living, originating 800 years before the birth of Jesus. The purpose of the Code was to promote holiness among God's people living within the bounds of the Holy Land. Again, they were nation-building, and their survival depended on successfully creating a vibrant, functioning society, including strong families.

Keeping the Code also preserved the sacredness of the Promised Land – the property God promised to Abraham. Since all bodily discharges (*semen, blood, etc.*) were “unclean,” spilling any of them onto the sacred land made it unclean, too. Leviticus' author declared the Canaanites, who inhabited the Holy Land before the Jews, were evicted because they defiled the land (*Leviticus 18:25*). Therefore, the Code regulated all aspects of life to maintain Israel's faithfulness and, thereby ensuring their future as a nation in the Promised Land.

Consider the variety of commands contained in the Holiness Code that regulated life in the Holy Land,

“You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.”
(Leviticus 18:19, NRSVue)

“You shall not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her.”
(Leviticus 18:20, NRSVue)

“You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God.”
(Leviticus 19:3, NRSVue)

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.”
(Leviticus 19:9-10, NRSVue)

“You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.”
(Leviticus 19:27, NRSVue)

“You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord.”
(Leviticus 19:28, NRSVue)

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”
(Leviticus 19:33-34, NRSVue)

“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.” (Leviticus 20:10, NRSVue)

*“If a man lies with a woman during her period and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow, and she has laid bare her flow of blood; both of them shall be cut off from their people.”
(Leviticus 20:18, NRSVue)*

*“You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.”
(Leviticus 20:25, NRSVue)*

As you can see, the Code covered family relationships, respect for your neighbor, the hospitality and care directed toward aliens (*i.e., immigrants*), sexual relations, hygiene, and food. Violations of the Code, also known as “*abominations*,” were a breach of ritual purity that occurred, erasing the boundaries between “*clean*” and “*unclean*,” requiring purification to reclaim “*cleanliness*” and sometimes even calling for the execution of the offender to “*right the wrong*.” Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both describe sexual relations between two males as an abomination, with 20:13 calling for their execution.

Note: With the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 CE, the Great Sanhedrin (a tribunal of 71 Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem) abolished the death penalty for all sins but retained it as punishment for war crimes.

Let’s explore these passages from Leviticus in the context of the Holiness Code and examine their most literal renderings in Hebrew for clarity about what they say:

*“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”
(Leviticus 18:22, NRSVue)*

“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 bloodguilt is upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13, NRSVue)

On the surface, these passages from Leviticus seem to prohibit homosexuality – at least male homosexuality universally. Jacob Milgrom, a professor of the Hebrew Bible, notes this:

“Does the [Old Testament] Prohibit Homosexuality? It does, but the prohibition is severely limited. First, it is addressed only to Israel, not to other nations. Second, compliance with this law is a condition for residing in the Holy Land but is irrelevant outside it (see the closing exhortation, 18:24-30). Third, it is limited to men: lesbianism is not prohibited. Thus, it is incorrect to apply this prohibition universally [to all homosexual acts].

--from Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics, by Jacob Milgrom, Augsburg Fortress, 2004.

Milgrom argues that the Holiness Code applied only to Jews living in the Holy Land and no one else. Inhabitants of the Promised Land, including aliens/immigrants who chose to live there, were required to keep these laws or face banishment from the community and sometimes death. If a Jew lived elsewhere, these rules did not apply because the land where they lived was NOT the Holy Land. Others claim that despite the specificity of the Code for those living in the Holy Land, these universal moral guidelines are valuable for God's people today.

Nathan Nettleton, an Australian pastor, agrees somewhat; however, he is concerned with how we determine what's essential still today:

*"The holiness code is a mixture of things we would generally define as "**universal moral law**" (e.g., prohibiting child sacrifice, etc.) and "**cultural specifics**" (e.g., circumcision, food laws, hairstyles, etc.). There are parts of the holiness code that almost nobody regards as important for Christians today, but there are no simple rules for deciding which bits still matter and which don't. Some people argue that the New Testament makes clear which laws still hold and which don't and that the New Testament reiterates sexual laws. But the New Testament reiterates some food laws too, and we have since given them up without angst. Other people argue the term "abomination" tells us that this law is especially important, but ["abomination"] is also used in reference to some food laws. For example, Leviticus 11:16 calls eating ostrich an abomination, and it is on the menu in many Australian restaurants without attracting a single placard-waving Christian protester!"*

*--Nathan Nettleton, "Supporting Same-Sex Marriage as a heterosexual, Bible-believing, Baptist Pastor," in Speak Now: Australian perspectives on same-sex marriage, 2011, *Bolding mine*).*

Nettleton's distinction between "*universal moral law*" and "*cultural specifics*" is helpful. Still, as he points out, we haven't applied these labels with any consistency in determining which laws are timeless and universal and which are not. The former Asbury professor, Steve Harper, would argue that the standard for distinguishing between these two types of laws would be that "*anything that exploits or abuses anyone*" falls under the "*universal moral law*." "*Culturally specific*" laws govern all other behaviors based on the values and norms of a particular community. (See Steve Harper, Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality, 2019.)

This application of the law lets 21st-century Christians eat cheeseburgers, fat, pork, and shellfish — all things forbidden in the Holiness Code. It also dismisses the requirement for males to be circumcised and allows us to go out to eat on Sunday. We can plant a garden with a mixture of vegetable plants and cut the hair that grows on the sides of our heads. We can wear gold jewelry, braid our hair, and wear expensive clothes (*all forbidden by Paul in the New Testament*) and garments made with more than one fiber. Some argue that this recognition of "*culturally specific*" laws could also allow two

consenting adults in a same-sex relationship that is sacred, faithful, monogamous, and permanent to be seen as “*appropriate*” since we no longer live in an underpopulated world. Even so, others will still contend that regardless of the cultural context, the laws against male homosexuality fit into the “*universal moral laws*” category.

You get to decide for yourself what you believe about these laws; however, other faithful Christians also get to decide for themselves. We are forbidden, however, from acting in an unloving way toward one another if we disagree. (See the 59 references in the New Testament to “*love one another,*” which IS a “*universal moral law.*”)

There are other observations about the Levitical texts that require further inquiry. Milgrom notes,

“Both occurrences of the prohibition [of same-sex relations in 18:22 and 20:13] contain the phrase ‘as one lies with a woman,’ an idiom used only for illicit heterosexual unions.”

--from Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics, by Jacob Milgrom, Augsburg Fortress, 2004.

Most of us think where the English translation reads “*as with a woman,*” that it means “*a man interacting with another man as if the other man were a woman*” Yet, Milgrom points out that every instance of the idiomatic phrase in ancient Hebrew refers specifically to “*illicit heterosexual unions.*” Milgrom emphasizes the “*illicit*” or “*scandalous*” nature of these relationships, more like when a man “*lies with a woman inappropriately.*” If you look at the context of these passages (*Leviticus 18:6-18 and Leviticus 20:10-21*), there are specific family relationships where sexual intimacy between these two people is illicit and forbidden, therefore, inappropriate. Milgrom describes it this way,

The Hebrew Bible lists the following prohibited relations: nephew-aunt, grandfather-granddaughter, and stepmother-stepson. Thus, according to the [prohibitions against “illicit heterosexual unions,” there are also “illicit homosexual unions” like], nephew-uncle, grandfather-grandson, and stepfather-stepson [that] are also forbidden. This implies that the [Levitical] homosexual prohibition does not cover all male-male liaisons, but only those within the limited circle of family. However, homosexual relations with unrelated males are neither prohibited nor penalized.

--from Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics, by Jacob Milgrom, Augsburg Fortress, 2004.

Whether you think Milgrom’s theory about Leviticus only forbidding specific homosexual relationships is valid, his main argument remains that the prohibitions in the Holiness Code regarding all abominations applied only to the Jews living in the Holy Land.

These Levitical passages were likely in Paul's mind as an expert in the law when he addressed the issue of same-sex relations in 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, and Romans. If so, the idiom used in both Old Testament passages referring to "illicit sex" could also have factored into Paul's use of the obscure Greek word "malakoi." Remember that Harper paraphrased this word as "uncontrolled" or "obsessive" behavior. Harper says,

"Malakoi" are people whose sexuality is out of control and practiced without respect for people or boundaries. William Barclay refers to them as sensualists. They are self-indulgent people, to the extreme. Because the word "malakoi" described behaviors other than sexual: greed and living in luxurious excess, which generally referred to womanizers, not to same-sex behaviors, "malakoi" were males who seduced women without hesitation and did so over and over. None of these were LGBTQ people, but even when there was same-sex excess, it was not interpreted as related to a person's orientation but rather to one's being out of control – something that could happen to anyone, something that always violated covenant love."

--Steve Harper, *Holy Love: A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality*, 2019, pp. 41-42.

Leviticus could have prohibited deceitful and seductive homosexual relationships that exploit vulnerable people like womanizers do when they take advantage of vulnerable women.

Even if one disagrees with Milgrom's and Harper's conclusions, it's essential to see how others may come to different yet faithful understandings about "what the Bible says" about homosexuality. The point is not that we all agree on one interpretation; the goal is that we humbly consider that "ours" may not be the only "biblical" position. It can still be our belief that we hold with conviction, but we can accept that other faithful followers of Jesus Christ might have a different, equally earnest view. We can agree to disagree and remain in fellowship with humility as we develop our love and respect for one another.

Bruce Gerig, a biblical scholar, sees something different in the Leviticus Scriptures from Milgrom's focus on the idiomatic phrase "as with a woman." Instead, Gerig focuses on the Hebrew words translated as "man" and "woman" in both Leviticus and Genesis. In Leviticus, we read (with the Hebrew words inserted),

*"You [where 'you' is an implied **ish** אִישׁ] shall not lie with a male [**zakhar** זָכָר] as with a woman [**ishshah** אִשָּׁה]; it is an abomination."
(Leviticus 18:22, NRSVue, original Hebrew word addition mine)*

*"If a man [**ish** אִישׁ] lies with a male [**zakhar** זָכָר] as with a woman [**ishshah** אִשָּׁה], both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their bloodguilt is upon them."
(Leviticus 20:13, NRSVue, original Hebrew word addition mine)*

Gerig observes that “*ish*” is the most common word used throughout the Old Testament to refer to “*men*” in general, and “*ishshah*” is the most common for “*woman*.” “*Ish*” refers to males who are husbands and fathers, while “*ishshah*” refers to females who are wives, sexual partners, mothers, concubines, or prostitutes. This definition of “*ishshah*” gives you a sense of the second-class place of women in Hebrew culture. Gerig adds (*noting that “SHC” followed by a number refers to an entry in Strong’s Hebrew Concordance that provides translations and contexts for Hebrew words used in the Bible*),

“However, ‘zakhar’ (SHC #2145, ‘male’) along with ‘zekhur’ (SHC #2138, a variant meaning the same) occur only 86 times in the Old Testament – compared with 2,160 times for ‘ish.’ As a [frequent] companion [feminine reference] to ‘zakhar,’ ‘neqebhah’ (translated as ‘female’ in Genesis 1:27, SHC #5347) occurs 22 times in the Old Testament.

“The more specialized meanings of ‘zakhar’ and ‘neqebhah’ become clear right from the beginning of Genesis. There, we read that God created Adam and Eve, the first ‘male [zakhar]’ and ‘female [neqebhah],’ to fill and rule over the earth and to have fellowship with him (Genesis 1:27-28, 5:2) – amazing sacred duties. Later, Noah is instructed to take representative land creatures, ‘male’ and ‘female,’ into the Ark to keep their species alive during the Flood (Genesis 6:19; 7:3,9,16). God instructs Abraham to begin circumcising all the ‘males’ of his family and lineage as a sign that the Israelites are His special, covenant people. In all these cases, ‘zakhar’ refers not just to a ‘male,’ but to ‘a male dedicated to God, with some special sacred function to perform.’”

See Bruce L. Gerig, *“The Levitical Ban: A Mysterious Puzzle, 2003.*

According to Gerig, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 forbids a man, an “*ish*,” from lying with a “*zakhar*.” Here, “*zakhar*” could be “*a male who held special, sacred duties,*” as indicated above. This interpretation would include Israelite men visiting the Temple three times yearly, those who made a sacred vow to God, those preparing for war, those returning from exile to renew Temple worship, or boys dedicated to God, like Samuel. If this reading of the prohibition is accurate, the restriction against same-sex relations would still only apply when the person performed their sacred duty.

However, Gerig points out that the Hebrew word “*zakhar*” was not only applied to males who followed Israel’s God (*Yahweh*) but also to males “*set apart or dedicated to any deity,*” even a pagan deity. The writer of Leviticus probably had the Canaanites in mind, the former inhabitants of the Holy Land, when he wrote of the “*zakhar*.” These Canaanite “*zakhar*” engaged in cultic male prostitution, selling their sexual services to those who worshiped the pagan god Baal to raise money for their pagan sanctuaries. There were probably remnants of the Canaanite religion that endured beyond their banishment, so Gerig argues Leviticus warns the Jews against an “*ish*” lying with a “*zakhar*” – that is, for a Jewish man to lie with a male prostitute in a pagan temple. For the Israelites to venture into Canaanite religious practices would threaten their future.

Milgrom would continue to argue that despite our interpretation of what it means for “*a man to lie with a man as with a woman*,” the Holiness Code only applied to the Jews living in the Holy Land—no one else. So, arguing the particulars of the text is only for clarity for those subject to the Code—not for those for whom the Code has no bearing.

As I have stated before, these are interpretations that we must reason through as we discern what to believe about what the Bible says about human sexuality. You can decide for yourself, and then you must live consistently with the conclusions you draw.

I realize that there is a lot of detailed, technical biblical explanation that I’m sharing with you. Scripture requires careful and extensive inquiry if we are to mine for its value in a way that honors God, who inspired it, the people who wrote it, and those whose lives are impacted by our interpretations. You may recall that I said in an earlier paper that simple answers are often arrogant and dismissive, and I hope this paper helps you understand the basis of my assertion. It’s easier “*not knowing*” these things, but once we know, we must decide for ourselves what we believe.

Next week, I’ll tackle the Romans 1:26-27 Scripture in the paper on Circle #4, Part C. Please reach out with any questions or comments.