

Male-Male Homosexual Intercourse

Abstract

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 have been interpreted as constituting a general prohibition against all forms of male-male erotic behavior. I show in this paper that the prohibition is exquisitely specific in that it applies only to anal sex between two males.

Translation with Commentary

The verses Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are often understood as a general prohibition against male–male eroticism. A close examination of the underlying Hebrew, however, reveals that the text is better understood as a more narrow prohibition. In this study, I demonstrate that these two verses prohibit men from assuming a female role during homosexual intercourse. To read into these verses a general prohibition of male homoeroticism is probably unwarranted. This would be consistent with the view that male homosexuality is, in general, viewed negatively by God, not because of its erotic content, but because such behavior constitutes a violation of God’s created order.



Here are my translations of the two verses:

Leviticus 18:22

אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה הוּא וְאֶת־זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכָּבֶי

*And with a male, you shall not lie-down **as** a female. It is an abomination.*

Or, just for emphasis,

*And with a male, you shall not lie-down **as**
if you were a female. It is an abomination.*

Leviticus 20:13

אֶת־זָכָר מִשְׁכָּבִי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה עָשׂוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם מוֹת יוּמָתוּ דִּמְיָהֶם יִשְׁכַּב וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר
בָּם

*And a male who lies-down with another male **as** a female, commits an abomination.*

An abomination the both of them make. Surely they shall die. Their blood will be upon them.

Again, for emphasis,

*And a male who lies-down with another male **as if he were** a female commits an abomination.*

An abomination the both of them make. Surely they shall die. Their blood will be upon them.

Translation Notes:

The mechanical, word-for-word translation of the two texts are:

(18:22) And-with-a-male not shall-you-lie-down in-lying-places-of a-woman an-abomination [is] it.

(20:13) And-a-male who lies-down with-a-male in-lying-places-of a-woman an-abomination they-make the-two-of-them....

(NOTE: Words that have been hyphenated are translated from a single Hebrew word.)

lie down: The two verbs translated as “lie down“, תִּשְׁכַּב (*tishkav*) and יִשְׁכַּב (*yishkav*), occur in 18:22 and 20:13 respectively and are grammatical forms of the Hebrew root verb, שָׁכַב (*shakav*). The root means “he lied-down” but in the Qal stem, *shakav* is frequently a euphemism either for death or sexual intercourse. Fortunately, their meaning is readily determined by context. For both of these verses, the context is

manifestly sexual. In these two cases, then, *tishkav* and *yishkav* can be meaningfully translated as engaging in [homosexual] intercourse.

As an aside, when *shakav* (or its derivatives) occur in a sexual context, the relationships are uniformly illicit. By contrast when the Bible makes reference to sexual relationships within the boundaries of God’s will, the text will use a phrase such as “Adam knew his wife and she conceived” (Gen 4:1, 17) or “Abraham went in unto Hagar and she conceived” (Gen 16:4). The latter phrasing is used even in Gen 38:18 of Judah and Tamar, father-in-law and daughter-in-law respectively, where Judah had denied Tamar her rights under levirate law.

in lying places of a woman: This text is difficult to translate directly into modern English because of the differences between Hebrew and English grammar. Its mechanical translation is:

אִשָּׁה	מִשְׁכְּבֵי	אֶת־זָכָר
a-woman	<i>in-lying-places-of</i>	<i>With-a-male</i>

The phrase “*in-lying-places-of*” (*mish’kvei*) is the plural construct form of מִשְׁכָּב (*mishkav*) which literally means “a place of lying”. What occurs in this place of lying determines the meaning of *mishkav*. For example, if a man is said to be “*in a lying-place of death*“, he is understood to have died and is lying in a grave or coffin (2 Chr 16:14). If a man is said to be “*in a lying-place of sleeping*“, he is understood to be in a bed (2 Sam 17:28, Job 33:15). Not surprisingly, when a man is described as having sex “*in a lying-place of a woman*“, he is understood to be assuming the role of a woman during sexual intercourse.

With this in mind, the two verses might be more meaningful represented as follows:

(18:22) *And with a male, you shall not lie-down as a female...*

(20:13) *And a male who lies-down with another male as a female commits an abomination...*

In other words, a man, when engaging in homosexual intercourse, is not to be in the place (i.e., role) of a woman having sex.

This is a rather surprising twist on what many assume is the meaning of the text, i.e., as a general prohibition against male-male erotic behavior. As a matter of history, the meaning presented in this study is consistent with scholars as far back as Josephus and Philo, among others. This is also consistent with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, which translates the Hebrew as I have in this paper.

Unfortunately, this understanding is not expressed in most (all?) English translations.

One problem with the English translations is the use of the preposition ‘with’. Specifically, the preposition is added to form the phrase “*with a woman*” or “*with a female*“. This use is puzzling since the Hebrew word normally translated as ‘with’, *אִתּוֹ* (*et*), appears in the phrase “with a man”, although its Hebrew counterpart does not occur in conjunction with ‘woman’. Here, for example, are a number of popular English translations of Lev 18:22 in which I’ve underlined the added ‘with’ :

NRS You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

NLT “Do not practice homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman...

NKJ `You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.

RSV You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

In each of the translations above, by dropping the extraneous ‘with’, the English more accurately reflects the underlying Hebrew. For example, the NRS would then read:

You shall not lie with a male as a woman; it is an abomination

This is a more accurate (and literal) rendering of the Hebrew and clearly prohibits a male from assuming the female role in homosexual intercourse. It turns out that the Hebrew sages who translated the Hebrew into Greek (when creating the Septuagint) did not make this mistake. Here is a mechanical, word-for-word, translation of the Greek of Lev 18:22 (Septuagint):

καὶ	μετὰ	ἄρσενος	οὐ	κοιμηθήσῃ
<i>and</i>	<i>With</i>	<i>a male</i>	<i>Not</i>	<i>will you sleep</i>
κοίτην	γυναικός	βδέλυγμα	γάρ	ἔστιν
<i>lying as</i>	<i>a woman</i>	<i>abomination</i>	<i>For</i>	<i>I am</i>

Like the Hebrew from which it was translated, in the writers viewed the word ‘woman’ as descriptive, not objective. Thus, the phrase ‘*as a woman*’ describes the role assumed during homosexual intercourse.

Conclusion

Taken together, these two verses prohibit any homosexual act in which one of the males assumes the role of a female. Taken on face value, these verses would seem to restrict God’s prohibition only to anal sex between two males. However, some scholars, notably Robert Alter, would include oral sex between two men as well, but the text isn’t explicit and he admits to enlarging the prohibition in such a way as to include the penetration of any orifice.

What is clear, however, is that these two verses cannot be used to justify a general prohibition against all forms of male –male erotic activity.

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