

# As It Is Written

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The RSV and NRS translations of Leviticus 18:22 tell us,

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

And similarly in 20:13(a)

*If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination;*

These two verses are commonly understood to constitute a general prohibition against male–male homosexual practice. However, a close examination of the underlying Hebrew of these two verses reveals that they might be more correctly



understood as a narrow prohibition limited to anal penetration. Indeed, Robert Gagnon makes a compelling argument that, male-male homosexual practice is offensive to God, not because of its erotic content, but because this specific behavior constitutes a violation of God’s created order<sup>1</sup>. In this column I advance a scripture-based argument that only male-male intercourse is prohibited.

Other forms of male homosexual or erotic behavior are simply not in view.

We begin the study with a mechanical translation of the Hebrew of these two verses<sup>2</sup>:

*(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...*

The translations are pretty clear. The focus of Leviticus 18:22 is the man who is “on the bottom” or, more explicitly, the male who has adopted or is playing the role of

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<sup>1</sup> By way of explanation, all male and female mammals were designed to be physically complementary. Homosexual intercourse violates that complementarity Gagnon, Robert A. J., “*The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*”, Abingdon Press, Nashville 2001, pp 169-175.

<sup>2</sup> Words that have been hyphenated are translated from a single Hebrew word and bracketed words are implied verbs.

the female. Verse 20:13, on the other hand, focuses on the male who “is on top”, that is male who penetrates his partner using his partner’s anal orifice. These two verses are clear: both roles are equally offensive in the Eyes of God.

Turning now to the Hebrew, both verses use זָכָר (*za-khar*) the word for the male gender to describe the participants. אָדָם (*a-dam*), the word meaning ‘man’ or ‘husband’ is not used. Why is this important? It turns out word *zakhar* occurs when the biblical authors have sexual distinctions in view<sup>i</sup>. With respect to sexual intercourse, *zakhar* is always used to refer to the male participant(s). See, for example, Leviticus 18:22, 20:13a; Numbers 31:17-18, 35; Judges 21:11-12. Finally, Ezekiel uses *zakhar* to refer to male images with which the disobedient Israelites committed idolatrous fornication (Ezekiel 16:17).

But, is anal sex in view? In this regard, note the verbs in these two verses תִּשְׁכַּב (*tish-kav*) and יִשְׁכַּב? (*yish-kav*) are translated as “*will you lie down*” (both are Qal imperfect forms). However, when used in the Qal stem these verbs frequently connote a euphemism either for death or sexual intercourse depending on context. Fortunately, in both of these verses the context is manifestly sexual. This is important because when *shakav* (the root of these two verbs) occur in a sexual context, the relationships are uniformly illicit<sup>ii</sup>.

Now, let’s look at the Hebrew text of both verses:

(18:22) וְאֶת־זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה הוּא

(20:13a) וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת־זָכָר מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה

Note that the highlighted phrase (*mishkøvei eeshah*) occurs in both verses. Literally translated the phrase means “*in-lying-places-of a-woman*”. What occurs in these places of lying determines the meaning of *mishkøvei*. For example, if a man is said to be “*in lying-places of death*”, he is understood to have died and is lying in a grave or coffin (2 Chronicles 16:14). If a man is said to be “*in lying-places 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 lying-places 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 meaningfully paraphrased as follows:

*(18:22) And with a male, you shall not play the role of a woman ...*

*(20:13a) And a male who lies-down with another male who plays the role of a woman ...*

In other words, the prohibited act is not all forms of male-male erotic behavior. Rather, the prohibition is levied against one man anally penetrating another.

This is a rather surprising twist on what many assume is 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 correctly. It is to the Septuagint that we now turn.

One of the problems with the English translations is the ambiguity caused by their insertion of the preposition ‘with’. Specifically, the preposition is added to form the phrase “*with a woman*”. This use is puzzling since the Hebrew word normally translated as ‘with’, *et*, appears in the phrase “with a male”, 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 emphasized 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*’ (colored red) 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 because the emphasis is “*acting as*” or “*playing the role of*” a woman.

It turns out that the Hebrew sages who translated the Hebrew into Greek (when creating the Septuagint) did not make this mistake. Here, for example, 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	ἐστίν
<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, the translators viewed the word ‘woman’ as descriptive (a role), not objective (a physical woman). Thus, the phrase, “*as a woman*”, describes the role assumed during homosexual intercourse.

Taken together, these two verses prohibit any homosexual act in which one of the males is anally penetrated. Taken on face value, these verses restrict God’s prohibition to apply 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 – only male homosexual intercourse is offensive to God.

Now, go and study

## References Consulted

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<sup>i</sup> Contexts in which *zakhar* occurs are passages dealing with the sexual distinction between male and female (Genesis 1:26-27, etc.); circumcision (Genesis 17:10, 23; 34:25, Exodus 12:5, etc.), sacrificial rites (Exodus 12:5), and census taking (Numbers 1:2, 3:15; Ezra 8:3; etc.). One minor case: Jeremiah 30:6 uses *zakhar* for the gender unable to bear children.

<sup>ii</sup> So, for example, 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.