

More pauline references to homosexuality?

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For some people these days a great deal depends on the Biblical references to homosexuality. My own view is that, quite apart from the Biblical references, a case can be made from the general Biblical vision of creation: the homosexual condition is an unfortunate and irrational intrusion into the divinely created order, and homogenital activity should be judged as morally wrong. On the other hand, neither do I deny that, in our contemporary situation, distinctions must be drawn and that our moral sensibilities must be continually refined. But that is not the point at the moment. The point here is purely linguistic. And the aim is to attend to a question that, as far as I can tell, has not been noted in the discussions of the relevant Pauline texts.

The several relevant Biblical passages have received scrutiny from both sides of the issue (Gen. 19:1-11; Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-11; Jude 7). But it is apparent that the 'revisionist' interpreters of these passages, who find there sometimes radically different meanings from the more or less traditional ones, are very mistaken.¹ Even so, I suggest that there may be yet more Biblical references to homosexual conduct than has been thought. In addition to the three explicit Pauline references included in those just mentioned, others, though more implicit, should be reckoned with in discussions of Paul's treatment of the subject.²

The key to this claim lies in the context of Paul's reference to *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.³

Don't you know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?
Don't be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *arsenokoitai*, mala-

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- 1 From the plethora of contributions, I mention only the two that appear to have made the biggest impact: John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
 - 2 I am granting here the Pauline authenticity of Galatians and Ephesians. My discussion does not depend on this, though it does assume at least a degree of continuity between these epistles and the demonstrably authentically Pauline epistles. The issue is not the specifically and authentically Pauline authorship of homosexuality references in the epistles, but the possible presence in the epistles of more of these references than has been thought *whoever* authored them.
 - 3 Quoted Biblical texts are from the New Revised Standard Version, adjusted occasionally in light of my present discussion.

koi, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

I take the terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* to refer at a minimum to participants in male homosexual relations; beyond that, their precise meaning is not important for our present purpose. (For the record, I share my own view that *arsenokoitai*, literally, 'males who bed males,' refers to those who assume the active role in the homosexual relation, whereas *malakoi*, literally, 'soft' or 'effeminate,' refers to those who lend themselves to others for such relations.) In 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul begins a discussion of sexual matters with the general term *porneia*, 'sexual immorality' (which in 6:10 he apparently intends as 'fornication,' in contrast to *moicheia*, 'adultery'). He then applies this in vs. 1 to an instance of heterosexual immorality, namely, a man 'having his stepmother,' presumably widowed. It occurs again in the personal form, *pornos*, 'sexually immoral person(s),' in vss. 9, 10, and 11. The last of these is important because here, in 5:11, it is included in a Pauline list of vices, similar to that in 6:9-11 but with a difference. In the list in 6:9-11 we have initial references to *pornoi* and *moichoi* followed by references to *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. All of this suggests that Paul uses *porneia/pornos* (and now also *moicheia*) of heterosexual activity specifically. It is further suggested that in 6:9 *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, as references to homosexuals, stand in contrast or in addition to *pornoi* as a reference to heterosexuals. In all other Pauline instances of *porneia*, *pornos*, and the verb *porneuo*, the reference, whenever the application is discernible, is always to heterosexuals, as it is explicitly, for example, in 1 Cor. 7:2.

Paul's terminology in similar lists⁴ should be noted, specifically the word *akatharsia*, 'uncleanness,' in Galatians 5:19:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: *porneia*, *akatharsia*, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these. I am warning you as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

and Ephesians 5:3-5:

... *porneia* and *akatharsia* of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you.... Be sure of this, that no *pornos* or *akathartos*, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolator), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

and Colossians 3:5:

... Put to death... whatever in you is earthly: *porneia*, *akatharsia*, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

and also 2 Corinthians 12:21 (though not a list):

⁴ It is sometimes claimed that these lists involve references to sins randomly chosen, but I incline to the view that they (especially the lists in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 and 1 Tim. 1:9-11) are intended to reflect, loosely, the Law. One should note the explicit reference to the Law in the 1 Timothy list.

I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned and have not repented of the *akatharsia*, *porneia*, and licentiousness that they have practiced.

Clearly, in these passages Paul employs back-to-back, as in a formula, the terms *porneia* and *akatharsia*. Inasmuch as he normally uses *porneia* in reference to heterosexual offenses, we may naturally wonder what is added by the use of term *akatharsia*. My suggestion is that in these passages *akatharsia* is employed as a condensed and perhaps *euphemistic* expression in place of the more extended and harsher reference to *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* of 1 Corinthians 6:10. This view is strengthened considerably by the fact that *akatharsia* is the very word that Paul uses in Romans 1:24 where he characterizes homosexual activity:

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity [*akatharsian*], to the degrading of their bodies among themselves....⁵

Also relevant is Ephesians 5:11-12:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly.

One might be inclined to see a reference here to homosexual activity, especially in view of the Romans passage. But even if not, it is at least evidence that Paul does on occasion resort to indirect expression to avoid direct expression of what is deemed too shameful to speak of.

This provides an answer to the question why *akatharsia* is employed in addition to *porneia* when they both occur. But what about the four instances in Paul (Rom. 6:19, Eph 4.19, 1 Thess. 2:3 and 4:7) where *akatharsia* occurs apart from any reference to *porneia*, etc.? Ephesians 4:19 poses no problem for the suggestion that Paul on several occasions uses *akatharsia* euphemistically for homosexual behavior, and in fact provides, possibly, further support for it. In Ephesians 4:19, *akatharsia* might easily refer to Gentile homosexuality in view of the striking parallelism of the whole passage, vs. 17-19, with Romans 1:21-28 in which Gentile homosexuality figures so centrally. In fact, Ephesians 4:17-19 can be read as a sort of short version of Romans 1:21-28. On the other hand, there seems to be no way that *akatharsia* in Romans 6:19 and 1 Thessalonians 2:3 and 4:7 can be construed as references to homosexuality, but, on my view, neither is it necessary that it should. The point is that *akatharsia* refers euphemistically to homosexual acts when it occurs in a list in which different sins of a sexual

5 While it is true that homosexual activity is not mentioned explicitly until vs. 26, it appears that this is what Paul refers to in vs. 24: The identical language of 'degrading' (*to atimazesthai*) is used both in reference to the misuse of the body in vs. 24 and then again in specific reference to homosexual activity in vs. 26-27. Likewise, the exact phrase, 'God gave them up' (*paredoken autous ho theos*) occurs in reference both to the people targeted in vs. 24 and those (homosexuals) targeted in vs. 26-27. Thus, that the homosexual activity mentioned in vs. 26-27 is to be construed as a specification of a generic immorality mentioned in vs. 24 strikes me as a bare possibility.

nature are delineated, or when it is conjoined with *porneia*. There is no reason why it should not be employed occasionally with its ordinary and more general meaning.

Even so, it may be relevant that in the four passages just considered, where the reference might be, or even certainly isn't, to homosexual conduct, all but one (1 Thess. 2:3) place a sexual construal on *akatharsia*. There seems, then, to be a Pauline linguistic *Tendenz* with respect to his employment of *akatharsia*, a word of otherwise broad inclusion. The only other occurrence of *akatharsia* in the New Testament is at Matthew 23:27 where it has clear reference to unclean objects. And, as for the adjective, *akathartos*, in Acts 10:14 and 11:8 it refers to foods, in Acts 10:28 it refers to persons, in Revelation 17:4 it is linked to *porneia*, and in 18:2 to animals, and Paul himself uses it in 1 Corinthians 7:14 of children, and in 2 Corinthians 16:17 of general ritual practices, and, we have already seen, in Ephesians 5:5 of immoral persons (possibly, or probably, sodomites). The Pauline usage of *akatharsia*, specifically, is thus quite pointed.

How does this proposal fit with Paul's cultural-linguistic *Sitz im Leben*? It would be relevant if a survey of Greek literature turned up even one instance of *akatharsia* or the adjective *akathartos* in reference to homosexual activity, but such a precise parallel is not to be found (if it had been found it would have been noted long ago). There are, however, several passages from the century or so before Paul that suggest that *akatharsia* was used with a strong sense of 'bodily filth' connected especially with the privates, which would naturally lead to a use of the word in connection with homosexual activities. The historian Diodoros of Sicily (c. 40 BC), in *History*, V, 33, 5, describes the practice of using urine for bathing as *akatharsia*. The scholar Dionysios of Halikarnassos (c. 8 BC), in *Roman Antiquities*, XIX, 5, 52, describes a drunkard apparently 'mooning' and defecating at the Roman ambassador as practicing *akatharsia* 'which is not fitting to name.' Philo of Alexandria (c. 30 AD), in *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis*, II, 29, uses *akatharsia* of indulgence of the senses by analogy with public defecation. Greek philosophers of Paul's era, Cornutus, *Nature of the Gods*, 46 (the pig is most unclean, *akatharsia*) and Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV, 11, 16 (the body unbathed will smell and be unclean, *akatharsia*). Later Christian authors of the first century AD use *akatharsia*, like Paul, in a list, and with an explicit or apparent connection with sexual sins: Note *Barnabas*, 10, 8 (oral sex = uncleanness, *akatharsia*) and *Second Letter of Clement*, 6 (uncleanness, *akatharsia*, used in immediate conjunction with adultery).

On the other hand, the Septuagint employment of *akatharsia/ akathartos* may hold some stronger implications.⁶ In the older traditions, these terms have the material sense of uncleanness stemming from contact with cultically

6 On some of the following, see Friedrich Hauck and Rudolf Meyer, 'Katharos, etc.,' *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965-73), III, 427-29.

impure objects (Lev. 7:21), animals (Lev. 11:1ff.), places (Lev. 14:40), corpses (Num. 9:6), lepers (Lev. 13:11), idolatrous activities (Ez. 36:17-18), and such. Sexual processes, too, can be a source of uncleanness, as in menstruation (Lev. 20:21). In the Holiness Code of Leviticus (chs. 17-26), homogenous relations are condemned as an 'abomination' (18:22; 20:13), along with numerous other defilements of a sexual sort, such as bestiality (18:23), incest (18:6), and adultery (20:10).⁷ Thus, though *akatharsia/akathartos* don't occur in direct connection with homogenous activity, such activity is included in the general category of uncleanness (= defilement, *miaria*⁸) in this material sense. This material sense of *akatharsia* continued into later Judaism and into the New Testament (as in Matt. 23:27). And there evolved alongside it a wider, more spiritual and more moral meaning according to which it is not the object that is unclean but one's own state (as in Isa. 6:5, Prov. 6:32, and Matt. 15:11).⁹

That in the Pauline passages cited above (the Romans passage and the Pauline lists) Paul's interest is in uncleanness in this spiritual or moral sense is clear.¹⁰ But that is beside the point. The point is that one might believe, as I do, that Paul's reference to *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 self-consciously echoes Leviticus 18:22¹¹ where, throughout that context, the idea of uncleanness (= defilement) plays such a prominent role. If so, it would be utterly unsurprising that in the somewhat parallel lists in Galatians 5:19, Ephesians 5:3, 5, and Colossians 3:5, and also 2 Corinthians 12:21, *akatharsia* occurs as a substitute for *arsenokoitai*. And, again, this equation would appear to be reinforced by the clear use of *akatharsia* = homosexual activity in Romans 1:24.¹²

I have not argued in a dogmatic manner that *akatharsia* in Galatians 5:19, Ephesians 5:3, 5 (adjective), Colossians 3:5, and 2 Corinthians 12:21 is a reference to homogenous activity. On the other hand, such a thesis is compatible with all

7 That all of these, and others, are 'abominations' is evident from, for example, Lev. 18:26 and 29.

8 The verb *miaino*, 'to defile,' occurs throughout the context, and in the immediate context of the reference to homosexual activity, e.g. Lev. 18:23, and in 18:24 in a way that includes homosexual activity.

9 *Akatharsia* does not occur here, but the verb *koinoo*, 'to pollute or make unclean,' does, and it is apparent from the context (Matt. 15:1ff.) that the traditional distinction between clean and unclean is in view.

10 On these and related points, see the brief discussion by Mark Reasoner, 'Purity and Impurity,' *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald W. Hawthorne, et al. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 775-76.

11 It has been argued, in fact, that Paul himself coined the word *arsenokoites* from the Septuagint version of Lev. 18:22 (see James B. De Young, 'The Source and NT Meaning of *Arsenokoitai* with Implications for Christian Ethics and Ministry,' *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 3 (1992). In any case, the philological connection seems undeniable.

12 Actually, one might argue that since it is not only male-male activity that is in view in Rom. 1:24-27 but also lesbianism, the Pauline references to *akatharsia* in the Pauline lists is, at least indirectly, a reference to both sorts of homosexual activity.

the evidence, and there does appear to be good grounds for it. It may well be, then, that there are more Pauline references to homosexuality than the three that are inevitably and exclusively cited. This possibility, and even likelihood, should be a datum in continuing discussions involving of the Pauline references to homosexual activity.

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