The Purpose of this Bible Study: The purpose of the bible study is to explore what the bible says about homosexuality. The topic of homosexuality has been a contentious one in the church and in society. Homosexuality is a very public topic, it is depicted both positively and negatively in the media, and has been the cause of great dissension in the church. All churches that have endorsed homosexuality have suffered membership decline, but it is unclear as to whether or not homosexuality is the primary cause for loss. That being said, there are currently 17 states that allow for same-sex marriage while 33 states ban it (as of April, 2014). As I understand it, the topic of homosexuality has not been formally discussed in a Bible Study nor in Zion Lutheran Church. Since the topic of homosexuality is one that is likely to become a larger part of public discourse, and since the ELCA has passed a Social Statement on sexuality, it seems to make sense to discuss the issue of homosexuality as it relates to the Bible and the ELCA’s social statement. That being said, it was a difficult decision for me to propose Homosexuality as a topic for Bible Study given how divided Christians are on the subject. But, in the end, I firmly believe that it is better to talk about the difficult things because it is through difficult conversations that we grow and learn.

My hope for this study: By this study’s end I hope that we are better able to articulate what we believe concerning homosexuality in the Bible as well as clearly state the ELCA’s position on the subject. It is not enough to say, “The Bible says that homosexuality is an abomination” nor is it enough to say that, “Jesus died for all sinners.” The former charge that homosexuality is an abomination reduces a person’s confession to either legalism or biblicism. That is, the “Purity Code” found in Leviticus is full of commandments that the church does not and has not ever kept. So, to quote one command and dispense with the others is at a minimum inconsistent. Secondly, in saying, “The Bible says that homosexuality is an abomination” is essentially to say that, “the Bible says it so that settles it.” The church has only begun to be used this way, that is biblical literalism, in the early 20th century in the United States as a response to Darwinian Evolution in an attempt to defend the "truth of the bible" from a scientific perspective. The great tradition of the church both ancient and modern is and should be wary of "proof texting" scripture. In using the bible in this way we divorce quotes of scripture from their context and larger narrative. On the other hand, when we say that "Jesus died for all" the entirety of the
Law is reduced to naught. Does such a statement imply that we are to continue sinning even though we know that sinning is wrong? Does the Law even matter? The Apostle Paul answers this in Romans 6, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!"

It is my sincere hope that by the end of this bible study you will be better able to express your opinion more articulately, no matter what opinion you have. As a matter or course, I will not present my personal opinion on homosexuality until the end of the Bible Study in order to attempt to maintain balance during our conversations and wrestling with scripture (this is open to debate).

**Leviticus - an overview**

Leviticus is the English translation of the title of the book from the Septuagint, the Greek Bible (Levitikon). A Levite is a priest, thus, the word Leviticus is literally translated "things pertaining to priests." The Hebrew title of the book is Torat Kohanim which is translated "instructions for the priests." It has also been titled, "and The Lord called..."

Most of Leviticus takes place at Sinai where the tabernacle was located. The tabernacle was instructed by The Lord to be a portable residence for the divine Presence. Thus, the tabernacle is referred to as the "tent of meeting" where Moses will receive God's commandments. Leviticus is where we get the formation of the priesthood from Aaron and his sons. The creation of the priesthood is the beginning sacrificial worship. Leviticus is 1/3 the size of the entire Torah (1st five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers). Leviticus, despite its length, takes place over the course of one month, yet it is the largest of the first five books of the Bible.

Jewish children begin their study of the Bible with Leviticus because it gives practical knowledge of God's expectation for conduct, family, and worship. Today, modern Jews do not strictly follow all of the commands in Leviticus, of which there are 613. Some dietary laws are kept, some regulations concerning sex and marriage are kept, some commands regarding family are kept, and some forms of purity are observed. And, most of the festivals are observed, but not all. The reason for this is complex, but it is enough to say that the Temple, where ritual sacrifices were performed, has not existed for over 1900 years. So, the lack of a Temple and the lack a place to perform ritual sacrifices precludes the ability to perform any of the regulations and commandments regarding ritual sacrifice as well as most of the priestly functions that are in Leviticus.

The chapters that concern us are chapters 17-26 which is called the Holiness Code by both Jews and Christians. The most important teaching in this section is found at Leviticus 19:17-18, "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your own kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am The Lord your God.”

According to the *Jewish Study Bible*, these verse means, "There is really no such thing as a mitzvah (the relationship between God and human as well as between human and human is collapsed into love of neighbor because harming a neighbor in any way is harming God and, more specifically God’s name because we are God’s representatives on earth) pertaining solely to interpersonal relations; the love of one’s neighbor is a divine command, and every offense against one’s fellow human being desecrates the name of God... this is the central pillar of religious thought (pg. 206)."

Dating the book of Leviticus is difficult. It has been called pre-exilic, or pre-Assyrian exile before 600BC, exilic, or written during the Babylonian exile in the 500s BC, as well as post-
exilic, or written sometime after the Babylonian exile. It is likely that portions of the book of Leviticus are written across the span of all three time periods. The book, like most of the Old Testament, is written by and to free Israelite men. All the commands imply that the man is the one who would be able to make the decision to either deal punishment or break a command. In Leviticus, women are not given agency, that is freedom to make decisions, and are often discussed as though they are property.

The books stated purpose is to make the Israelites distinct from the inhabitants of Canaan, where the Israelites are going. The Israelites should look, act, eat, and worship differently than all the other cultures around them because they are God’s people and should be identifiable as such.

A brief word about sexuality in the ancient Near East. Most of the cultures in this time period practiced same sex intercourse. Greeks would condone same sex interactions between men of the same class and age. Romans, on the other hand, would condone same sex interactions between older men and younger men of the same class, or men of the same age from different classes. This relationship was a way to "teach" the younger man/boy about sexuality. The relationship could be entered into or ended by the older man, or when the boy became old enough to make decisions for himself. Assyrians also practiced same sex intercourse, and it is likely that the Canaanites did as well. Most military training involved sleeping with the same sex to "bolster morale and build a sense of community." Lastly, in terms of warfare, it was customary for the victorious army to rape the men of those who were defeated in an effort to shame them.

- **Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and the Holiness Code**
- Translation
  - refer to handout Leviticus 18:22 in translation
  - NRSV's translation, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."
  - JSB's translation, "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abhorrence."
  - "Lie with" means to have penetrative sex.
  - abomination means, "to hate" or "abhor." to ebah in Hebrew
- Why should the word "homosexual" not be used in Leviticus and the corresponding other references to sexual behavior between males and females of the same sex? The word "Homosexual" was first used in the English language in the late nineteenth century, 1892, as a translation of a German book on Psychology which referred to two people of the same sex having sex, consequently, the word "homosexual" did not appear in the English Bible until 1946.
  - Why is this relevant? Homosexual behavior, as understood today, as a committed loving relationship between two people who have all the aspirations and intentions of a heterosexual couple was not within the list of possible definitions for same sex couple. Sexual acts between people of the same sex were considered a perversion, that is, something not regularly occurring in the public sphere, until relatively recently. If there were couples of the same sex, it was kept quiet for fear of persecution or even institutionalization. So, to use the word "Homosexual" in a bible translation is as anachronistic as using the word physics simply because the concept was not within the purview of those either writing the scriptures nor interpreting it throughout Christian history. Male
• Follow up note from the Jewish Study Bible, "Biblical and ancient Near Eastern culture was not familiar with homosexuality in the sense of a defined sexual orientation or lifestyle. It acknowledges only the occasional act of Male anal intercourse, usually as an act of force associated with humiliation, revenge, or subjection. Of the biblical legal collections only Leviticus mentions it... It seems that the author of Leviticus views all sexual acts that are not potentially procreative as aberrant (pg. 251-252)."

• A brief word on the understanding of sexuality in ancient Near Eastern culture: "be fruitful and multiple" is from Genesis 1:28. Sexual activity between males resulted in the waste of semen, and more specifically offspring which was considered the seed. For a woman to conceive was literally to "receive seed" from Numbers 5:28. This implies that semen contains the "whole" person where if semen was spilled on the ground for example, a person could be considered a murderer.

• Biblical References:

  • Genesis 38:9-10: But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sigh of The Lord, and he put him to death also. Death for spilling semen?

  • Psalm 127:3-5, "Sons are indeed a heritage from The Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them." That is, the quiver is literally full of children...

  • The word for conception in Hebrew is "heron" which is a masculine noun.

  • In short, like the word "homosexual" is anachronistic to biblical understandings of sexuality, so to is the idea of sperm fertilizing an egg, that is, in ancient Near Eastern Culture, men planting seeds in the ground of a womb where the baby was grown similar to agricultural. Men were the sole carriers of the children, which were planted in females to be grown.

  • Is this understanding of procreation retained today? Do we practice sex only for the purpose of procreation?

• Important Distinction:

  • Moving on, if a man lies with a man like he lies with a women, the man has become the recipient of seed (Numbers 5:28) which means that the man has transgressed his prescribed role in sexual relations; Men were for planting seed which is an active role, women were for receiving seed and growing which is a passive role. For the ancient Near East, this action was considered against the roles set for male and females in nature. In the ancient Near East, women were understood to be less than males, so when a male has sex with another male this means that at least one of the participants has condescended to being the passive/female recipient of penetrative sex. This lower view of women implies that men, in being the passive participant in sex, have degraded themselves to the female status. The distinction is made clear if we observe the prohibition from Leviticus 18:23 and 20:13, the prohibition is not "do not have sex with a male as one has sex with a woman," it is, "do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman." Lying down implies receiving penetration. It is therefore a passive role.

  • More: All of the commands that invoke language of abomination are in instances when species or kind are transgressed in either dietary, sexual, or pagan worship laws. This
means that you shall not mix two kinds of things together that are dissimilar. For example, you wouldn't plant corn and tomatoes in the same field. You would not incorporate the worship of yourself with the worship of God. You would not have sex like a woman if you are a man, do not lie with a male. Specific examples: Lev. 19:19, "You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind (no muts!); you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials." Concerning adultery, it is not about sexual sin, it is about the confusion of whose property the woman is, see Leviticus 20:10, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." Leviticus 18:23 is the same, it is about the confusion of kinds, of men being men and women being woman, put another way, men were more dignified than women, and if a man receives anal penetration, he has become like a woman, degraded and subjected to another. So with adultery, my property and your property is transgressed, with human and animal sexual relations the distinction between human and animal is transgressed, with men having sex with men, the boundary between male and female is transgressed.

Regarding the above mentioned statements about kind and species in groupings: All of Leviticus is addressed to free Israelite men. "I am The Lord Your God who freed you from Egypt" is one of the most popular "names" of God in the Old Testament. That an Israelite was free was of crucial importance to a male's identity. If, for whatever reason, a male were considered unfree, passive, or receptive in any way, their identity as an Israelite would be called into question. Women in this society were not free, and if a male lied down to have sex like a woman, the man would be transgressing his role as a freed Israelite male. A free Israelite male cannot be receptive or passive, he must be dominant.

Lastly, this whole premise, of dominance in regards to sexual relationships as well as distinction between species in groups is intimately related to the "Honor/Shame" system of the ancient world. Something is honorable if you do something that fulfills a prescribed role for yourself or meets certain societal expectations. Something shameful would be if you did something that went against assumed roles. For example, in Assyria, when the King’s army and fortress were sacked, he said, "I was bent over (as in ready to receive penetration from the conquering army)." Also, when an army defeated another army on the field of battle, it was common practice for men to not only rape women, but more specifically men in order to shame them. Do we still use this language today? That is, "bent over."

Do we feel this way today?

Today, however, same sex mating patterns are found not only in humans, but throughout the animal kingdom, approximately 1500 species of animals. So, does "homosexual" behavior contradict the "laws of nature" if homosexuality is indeed found in nature? Put another way, if there is such a thing as natural law, the law that God wove throughout all creation for how everything should act and interact with each other, can we say that homosexuality is an abnormal practice if it is found throughout nature?

The view that men and women "go together" is taken strictly from anatomy in Leviticus. There is an apparent complementarity to men and women. But today, is sexual intimacy based solely on genitalia?
• Is the prohibition in Leviticus 18:22 bound to a particular time and place? That is, is this commandment relevant for today? How do you make such decisions? What parts of the Bible are or are not "universal" for all time and places?

• Leviticus 20:13 from the NRSV, "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 blood is upon them."

• If this commandment is applicable today, should homosexuals be put to death? If not, why not?

**Examples of the Holiness Code from Leviticus 17-26 that we do not practice today:**

• Leviticus 17:3, "If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or slaughters it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting (the tabernacle) of The Lord, he shall be held guilty of bloodshed; he has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people.” Are all the butchers in the world cut off from The Lord? Is anyone who eats at McDonalds an abomination worthy of being cut off from God?

• Leviticus 17:10, "If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people.” Does anyone eat rare meat?

• Leviticus 18:19, "You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness (sex) while she is in her menstrual uncleanliness.” Has anyone ever had sex when a woman has had her period? Is a period ritually unclean? Can women goto church when they have their period?

• Leviticus 19:4, "Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves..." Does anyone make an idol of anything? Themselves? Should you be cast out of the community?

• Leviticus 19:9, "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 leave them for the poor and the alien...” Do the farmers leave food for the poor and the immigrants? Do we want illegal immigrants in the US, let alone provide food for them by leaving parts of the fields unharvested?

• Leviticus 19:13, "You shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning.” Do we get paid on the same day of work every day?

• Leviticus 19:19, "You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” Does anyone wear blended fabrics? Do we allow farmers to plant two different kinds of seed in order to maximize yield while keep pests at bay?

• Leviticus 19:23, "When you come into the land and plant all kinds of trees for food, then you shall regard their fruit as forbidden; three years it shall be forbidden to you, it must not be eaten.” Really?

• Leviticus 19:27, "You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you.” Firstly, this text presumes men should have beards... It also presumes that you will have very long sideburns. We do not mark our bodies for the dead like the Caananites....

• Leviticus 19:33, "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 citizen among you; you shall
love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” How is the US doing with this?

- Leviticus 20:10, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." Is adultery a death penalty?
- Leviticus 20:25, "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." Chicken anyone?
- Leviticus 21:1, "No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin." should I stop doing funerals for the congregation?
- Leviticus 23:9, "When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest."
- Leviticus 25:4, "...but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for The Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard."
- Leviticus 25:8-17, "You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years...And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, everyone of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines.” Essentially, every 50 years property is sold back to its original owners at a fair price, and everyone returns home to their families, and all debts are forgiven. This year of jubilee carries over to any excessive debt that anyone incurs even beyond the year of jubilee, the law requires that the debts be forgiven without anger or blame.

- So, if we choose to enforce Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, then why do we enforce them as opposed to any of the other portions of Leviticus? What does Jesus say about Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13?