

To Christians arguing 'no' on marriage equality: the Bible is not decisive

Written by Robyn J. Whitaker, Bromby Lecturer in Biblical Studies, Trinity College, University of Divinity



Christians who call on the Bible to support their arguments against marriage equality are on shaky ground. Shutterstock/The Conversation

As Australia faces a [postal plebiscite](#) on same-sex marriage, we are seeing a steady stream of articles arguing the “yes” or “no” case. Many on the “no” side are prone to citing the Bible or appealing to “biblical values”. But what does the Bible actually say about human sexuality and homosexuality in particular?

What follows represents a summary of critical biblical scholarship on the issue. Critical biblical scholarship draws on a range academic disciplines including literary criticism, archaeology, history, philology, and social science to offer the most plausible, historically grounded interpretation of the Bible. It is not simply a matter of personal belief or citing official church doctrine.

Australian scholars are among leaders in the field when it comes to sexuality and the Bible. [William Loader](#) has written several books on the matter and this Anglican [collection of essays](#) is also excellent.

When it comes to homosexuality there are, at most, six passages of the Bible that are relevant. So what do these passages say?

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is well known. This is where the terms “sodomite” and “sodomy” originate, and it has long been associated with biblical condemnation of male homosexual sex. It is, however, actually about gang-rape.

In this story, the men of Sodom seek to rape two visitors (who are actually angels). Their host, Lot, defends them and offers them protection in his house, but offers his virgin daughters to be raped in their place.

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It is a deeply problematic and complex story that warrants an article of its own, but what is clear is that sexual violence and rape is harshly condemned, and so God destroys the town with sulphur and fire. Despite the linguistic history of the word “sodomite”, Genesis 19 has nothing to say about homosexuality or mutually consenting adults of the same gender expressing their desire and love.

Two of the laws of Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) seem more pertinent. They call a man lying with another man instead of his wife an “abomination”.

We should note first that the imagined scenario is a married man committing adultery with another male. It is not describing what we would understand to be a sexual orientation. We might also note the inherent sexism here: women apparently don't have the same desire or their sexuality is deemed too insignificant to be worthy of comment.

Again, we need some context. Yes, this verse clearly condemns adulterous homosexual sex in calling it an “abomination” (to'ebah), but here some of the other things also called an “abomination” in the Bible:

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Egyptians eating with Hebrews;

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having an image of another god in your house;

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sacrificing your child to the god Molech;

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having sex with your wife when she is menstruating;

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taking your wife's sister as a second wife; and

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eating pork.

Banned likewise is wearing mixed-fabric clothing, interbreeding animals of different species, tattoos, mocking the blind by putting obstacles in their way, and trimming your beard.

As you can see, there is quite an assortment of ancient laws, some of which seem to make good sense (such as no child sacrifice) and others of which the majority of Christians no longer keep (such as eating pork and wearing a wool-silk blend).

To claim one set as timeless truths while ignoring the others is patently hypocritical and goes against the grain of the text itself.

These two verses in Leviticus are the sum total of what the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) says about same-sex activities. The remainder of the biblical references occur in the New Testament, written between approximately 50 and 110 CE in the context of the Roman Empire.

The attitudes and norms of Graeco-Roman culture are critical in understanding these texts. In Graeco-Roman society, there was an acceptance that men might be attracted to other men. Even if married (to a woman) and often prior to marriage, a wealthy man might have a young male lover or male partner.

In educational settings, several ancient authors comment on the male-male mentoring that often included pederasty (sex with boys). The main ancient objection to male-male sexual activity was that one partner had to take the "woman's role" of being penetrated.

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In a patriarchal society, to be masculine was to be the active partner, whereas to be passive was deemed feminine and shameful.

These attitudes find their way into the New Testament in various forms. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10 list a wide group of people who will not “inherit the Kingdom” without changing. Paul is using a standard list of vices here to make a wider rhetorical point.

Where some English translations might include “homosexuality” on this list, the translation is not that simple, which is why various English words are used (adulterer, immoral persons, prostitutes).

The Greek word *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 means “soft” or “effeminate” and captures the Graeco-Roman distaste at a man taking a “female” role. In the Bible it is commonly used to describe fancy clothing, and outside the Bible was a term for cult prostitutes.

The word *arsenokoites* is rarer. Scholars have debated whether it refers to male prostitution or pederasty or something else. To translate it “homosexual” is problematic for two reasons: it is unlikely Paul had any concept of sexual orientation and he was certainly not describing a committed adult relationship.

In Romans 1:26-27, Paul condemns people swapping out their usual partner for one of the same gender. He claims this is a result of idolatry and uses it as part of his argument for why one should only follow (his) God.

It is typical of the strong “them and us” rhetoric of the ancient world, serving a larger argument and is not a statement on sexuality per se. As New Testament scholar Sean Winter summarises:

Paul shares a stereotypical Jewish distrust of Graeco-Roman same sex activity, but is simply not talking about loving partnerships between people with same sex orientation.

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We need to put all this in perspective. These are six verses out of more than 31,000 verses or roughly 0.016% of the text. In contrast, the Bible contains more than 2,000 verses about money (and related issues of greed, wealth, loans, and property), and more than 100 specifically on one's obligation to care for widows.

In other words, monitoring and proscribing human (homo)sexual activity is not a particular concern of the Bible when compared to the overarching demand for justice, economic equality, and the fair treatment of foreigners and strangers. For certain Christian groups to make this the decisive Christian issue is simply a misreading of biblical values.

Lest readers think the Bible is against sexuality generally, there is an entire biblical book devoted to celebrating human sexual desire. Written in the style of a Mesopotamian love poem, [the Song of Songs](#) (sometimes called Song of Solomon), speaks positively of both female and male sexual yearning.

Serious Christians cannot ignore the Bible. They can, however, make sure that they interpret it with all the tools available to them, that they examine their own biases, and stop over-simplifying the issues.

The Bible offers a [wide variety of marriage arrangements](#), many of which we no longer condone. It never condemns same-sex marriage, partly because it simply does not address the issue directly.

It does, however, give us an ethic to guide how we treat one another: an ethic based upon God's generous love and a profound concern for justice.

Robyn J. Whitaker does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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