


# Was Jesus Okay With Homosexuality? (2 of 6)

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**According to existing historical records, Jesus never explicitly mentioned homosexuality.**<sup>1</sup> This fact leads many to critique the church today for focusing on “things that Jesus never once talked about,” as Richard Rohr has put it.<sup>2</sup>

**What should we conclude from Jesus’ silence?** Did his silence mean homosexual behavior was a non-issue to him? Was he okay with it?

**This is part of a six-part blog series on Jesus and homosexuality:**

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**Arguments from silence can be powerful.** A famous example comes from the Sherlock Holmes short story “[The Adventure of Silver Blaze](#).” Here is some dialogue that shows how silence helped Holmes solve a mystery:

Gregory (Scotland Yard detective): “Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

Holmes: “To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

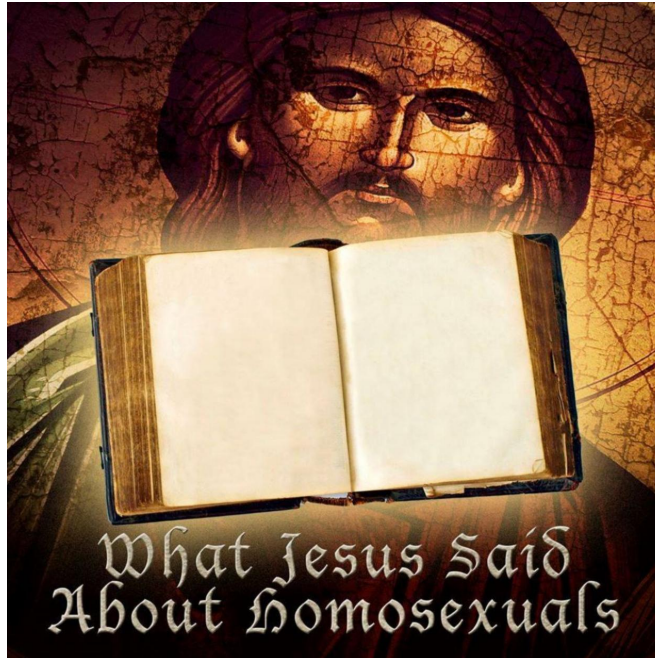
Gregory: “The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

Holmes: “That was the curious incident... Obviously the midnight visitor was someone whom the dog knew well. It was Straker who removed Silver Blaze from his stall and led him out on to the moor.”

The key lesson from this example is that silence is meaningful *when you have a strong reason to expect noise instead*.

There is a strong reason to expect a dog to bark if a stranger intrudes at midnight. Is there a strong reason to expect Jesus to have spoken about homosexuality? When the dog did not bark, Holmes concluded he must have been “okay with” the intruder. Can we include the same about Jesus and homosexual behavior? How should we interpret Jesus’ silence about homosexuality?

**In this post I am going to explain why I think Jesus’ silence on homosexuality behavior is *not* very meaningful—why it is *not* good evidence he approved of it. His silence is best understood as agreement with the existing Jewish consensus about homosexuality.**



A meme I found on Facebook. The person who shared it meant Jesus must approve of homosexuality, since he said nothing on the topic. I don't think that's what his silence meant.

## Ancient Jewish Beliefs About Homosexuality: What They Did

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What was the range of beliefs about homosexuality among ancient Jews?

**Let's consider first what Israel actually *did*. It is clear that some Israelites engaged in homosexual activity during the time between the conquest of Canaan under Joshua (about 1400 BC) and the fall of Jerusalem at the beginning of the Exile (586 BC).** Homosexual activity was common among the Canaanites before Israel entered the land, and over time Israel increasingly imitated them.

Various forms of homosexual activity are recorded several places in the Old Testament, some consensual and some not. For example:

Behold, the men of the city [of Gibeah], worthless fellows, surrounded the house, beating on the door. And they said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, that we may know him." (Judges 19:22; about 1300 to 1100 BC)

There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. (1 Kings 14:24; about 930 BC)

Eventually homosexual prostitution happened right in the temple in Jerusalem:

And he [King Josiah] broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the Lord (2 Kings 23:7; about 620 BC)

On the one hand, this evidence shows that many Israelites were okay with homosexuality—just as some Israelites were okay with sacrificing babies to idols and oppressing the poor and many other activities contrary to the Law of Moses. On the other hand, we have this evidence because it was preserved in texts that were part of the sacred scriptures of Israel, and these texts called these historical activities “abominations” ([1 Kings 14:24](#)).

**Significantly, when we examine the period right before and during the life of Jesus, we do not find Jews practicing homosexuality like they did prior to the Exile.**

Before the Exile, Jews widely imitated the sexual practices of the nations around them, just as they had imitated their idolatry. After the return from Exile, however, Jews showed an “obvious contrast with ancient Greek culture” around them regarding homosexuality, says commentator Craig S. Keener, an expert on the early Jewish and Greco-Roman setting of the New Testament. He summarizes the evidence:

**Jewish people... unanimously rejected homosexual behavior...** Jewish people associated homosexual activity especially (and probably largely accurately) with Gentiles. Although Jewish sources report Jewish adulterers, johns, and murderers, **Jewish homosexual practice was nearly unknown...** Idolatry and homosexual behavior [were recognized by] Jewish people... as exclusively Gentile vices.<sup>3</sup>

## Ancient Jewish Beliefs About Homosexuality: What They Wrote

**When we move from historical practices to written perspectives, the evidence is unanimous: Ancient Jewish literature consistently condemns all forms of homosexual behavior.** It is clear that, for ancient Israelites who were attempting to be faithful to the Sinai covenant, homosexual activity was never okay.

Let’s examine what ancient Jewish writings say about homosexuality. I’ll summarize the Old Testament evidence, but emphasize the evidence that is closer to Jesus’ day.

The Books of Moses present male-female marriage as the creation pattern ([Gen. 1:27-28; 2:18-25](#)). They also record two examples of homosexual activity that occurred before Israel existed: Ham “saw the nakedness of his father” Noah ([Gen. 9:20-25](#)) and the men of Sodom tried to “know” the men who were visiting Lot ([Gen. 19:4-11](#)). Both stories are brief, cryptic, and much argued over. In both cases, however, the narratives imply that the activity was not good.

The Law of Moses forcefully prohibited homosexual and transgender behavior:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination... If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. ([Lev. 18:22; 20:13](#); cf. [Deut. 22:5; 23:17-18](#))

**Significantly, these commands used the most general terms possible for homosexual behavior** (“a man lies with a male”), avoiding narrower terms that would have applied only to cases such as temple prostitution.<sup>4</sup> Underscoring this reality, both commands ended with the phrase “as with a woman”; it is clearly contrary to the rest of the Law of Moses to imagine that the commands were intended to mean “You shall not *commit rape* with a male as with a woman” or “You shall not *engage in prostitution* with a male as with a woman,” for both rape and prostitution were prohibited “with a woman” as well. Instead, these commands prohibited a male from doing with a man what would be, in the appropriate circumstances, right and good to do “with a woman.”<sup>5</sup>

These commands prohibited the act of homosexual union itself, not merely any possible negative attending attitudes or circumstances. They were not written in a form that distinguished between good homosexual activity (loving, consensual, faithful) and bad homosexual activity (lustful, violent, promiscuous), but between male and female.<sup>6</sup> These commands, therefore, excluded female-female sexual relations as surely as male-male.<sup>7</sup>

Even consensual homosexual acts were forbidden by these commands, as is indicated by the shared guilt (“both of them have committed an abomination”).<sup>8</sup> These blanket prohibitions of all homosexual acts formed the foundation, along with the Genesis creation account, for all future Jewish thinking about homosexuality.

The prophet Ezekiel described Sodom’s sins in a way that suggested her acts of “abomination” (compare with Lev. 20:13)<sup>9</sup> were a chief reason for her destruction:

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and **did an abomination** before me. So I removed them, when I saw it. (Ez. 16:49-50)

**What about Jews living nearer to the time of Jesus? What did they write about homosexual behavior?** Here are seven examples:

[Moses] compels us to recognize that we must perform all our actions... according to the standard of righteousness... For most other men [non-Jews] defile themselves by promiscuous intercourse... For they not only have intercourse with men but they defile their own mothers and even their daughters. — “The Letter of Aristeas” (second century B.C.)<sup>10</sup>

Neither commit adultery nor rouse homosexual passion... Do not transgress with unlawful sex the limits set by nature... And let not women imitate the sexual role of men. — Pseudo-Phocylides, *Sentences* (between 100BC and 100AD)<sup>11</sup>

The entertainment recorded by Plato [in *Symposium*] is almost entirely connected with love; not that of men madly desirous or fond of women, or of women furiously in love with men, for these desires are accomplished in accordance with a law of nature, but with that love which is felt by men for one another... for the greater part of the book is occupied by common, vulgar, promiscuous love. — Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* (early first century A.D.)<sup>12</sup>

All the world will be reduced to confusion by iniquities of wickedness and abominable fornications, that is, friend with friend in the anus, and every other kind of wicked uncleanness which it is disgusting to report. — *2 Enoch* 34:2 (first century A.D.)<sup>13</sup>

What about our laws about marriage? That law... abhors the mixture of a male with a male; and if anyone does that, death is its punishment. — Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion* (about 97 A.D.)<sup>14</sup>

These are the felons who are put to death by stoning. He who has sexual relations with (1) his mother... (4) with a male, and (5) with a cow. — *Mishnah, Sanhedrin* (second century A.D.)<sup>15</sup>

The unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God, nor will... those who commit outrages and have sexual intercourse with males. — “The Testament of Jacob” (ancient; date unclear)<sup>16</sup>

**It is important to notice several features of these quotes:**

- Their foundation for ethics was the Law of Moses.<sup>17</sup>
- They appealed also to creation, and therefore considered same-sex promiscuity to be unnatural in a way that heterosexual promiscuity is not.<sup>18</sup>
- They focused on same-sex acts themselves, not merely on contextual factors such as promiscuity or violence.<sup>19</sup>
- They spoke against even mutual, consensual homosexual relations (“friend with friend,” *2 Enoch*).

This is what Jews in Jesus’ day believed about homosexual behavior. This is the world into which Jesus was born.

There were no gay night clubs in Jerusalem. There was no “welcoming and affirming” synagogue in Nazareth. There were no Roman lawyers trying to convince Pilate to require Jewish bakers to make cakes for homosexual weddings. There were no Jews “coming out” on social media. There were no rainbow flags projected onto the temple mount. The Jerusalem Times was not publishing feel-good stories about LGBTQ persons.

Jewish denominations were debating topics like angels, the resurrection, how Jews should relate to their Roman occupiers, and even when divorce was justified.<sup>20</sup> But there was no intramural rabbinical debate about homosexuality. Jewish leaders came to Jesus to explore and test his views on many issues, but no one asked him about homosexuality. No one had to. Everyone knew that everyone already knew the answer. Homosexuality behavior was something “out there” that non-Jews did, and no Jewish rabbi had to stake out his public position on the topic.

**“What did Jews writing after the Old Testament period, from the fifth century BC through the sixth century AD think about homosexual practice?”** authors Fortson and Grams ask. After examining the evidence, here is their answer:

There is no debate at all: Jews consistently condemned homosexual practice of any sort after the return from the exile and right through the early church period. Jews understood the Old Testament to speak against homosexual behavior, and they accepted biblical authority in matters of sexual ethics.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, despite increasing homosexual activity within Israel prior to the Exile, the perspective of all existing ancient Jewish writings from the very first (the time of Moses) through the early Christian period is consistent:

For a period of about 2000 years, all Jews everywhere taught that homosexual unions of any sort were sinful and against nature.<sup>22</sup>

## Interpreting the Evidence

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For purposes of our discussion here about Jesus’ silence, this is the key sentence from Fortson and Grams: **“There is no debate at all: Jews consistently condemned homosexual practice of any sort after the return from the exile and right through the early church period.”**

This fits with Craig S. Keener’s summary of the same time period, as quoted above:

Jewish people... unanimously rejected homosexual behavior... Although Jewish sources report Jewish adulterers, johns, and murderers, Jewish homosexual practice was nearly unknown.

“Nearly unknown.” “No debate at all.” This is the world into which Jesus was born.

**If homosexual activity was “nearly unknown” among Jews of the time, then it is no wonder that we do not know of any explicit word from rabbi Jesus on the topic.**

**If there is “no debate” about what Jews taught in this period about homosexuality, then there was little reason for Jesus to be debating the topic, either—or for us to debating what Jesus might have believed about it.**

Historical Jesus scholar [J. P. Meier](#) makes the same point about Jesus and sexual ethics in general:

On sexual matters... one could call both Jesus and the Essenes extreme conservatives ... apart from the two special cases of divorce and celibacy, where he diverged from mainstream Judaism [and arguably was more stringent than they were], his views *were* those of mainstream Judaism. Hence there was no pressing need for him to issue or for the earliest Christian Jews to enshrine moral pronouncements about matters on which all Law-abiding Jews agreed. **If almost all Jews agreed that acts of fornication and adultery were wrong, there was no reason for Jesus, who shared these views** (see, e.g., [Mark 7:21-22](#); [Luke 16:18](#)) **to exegete the obvious.**<sup>23</sup>

Adultery was not a frequent topic in Jesus' teaching.<sup>24</sup> Sins of the heart were a more urgent concern, for many of his hearers aimed to "outwardly appear righteous to others"—avoiding public sins like adultery—"but within [were] full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" ([Matt. 23:28](#)).

If Meier's observation is valid for adultery, how much more for homosexuality, which was "nearly unknown" among Jews at the time? Robert Gagnon summarizes things well:

Jesus' alleged silence has to be set against the backdrop of unequivocal and strong opposition to same-sex intercourse in the Hebrew Bible and throughout early Judaism."<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

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What, then, should we conclude from Jesus' silence about homosexuality?

**Given that (a) homosexual practice was "nearly unknown" within Jesus' Jewish culture, and given that (b) there is "no debate" that Jews in Jesus' day "consistently condemned homosexual practice of any sort," it is wishful thinking to argue that, *just because our historical records do not record rabbi Jesus specifically mentioning the topic, he therefore approved of homosexual relationships.***

Remember the lesson from Sherlock Holmes: silence is meaningful *when you have a strong reason to expect noise instead*. In this case there was little reason to expect a word from Jesus. If Jesus was silent on the topic, then we, with his original audience, can safely assume that he agreed with the Jewish consensus that homosexual behavior is sinful.

**There is another silence, however, that is very telling.**

Given the universal consensus among first-century Jews that homosexuality was exceedingly evil, **imagine the outcry that would have arisen if Jesus' listeners had noticed any reason to believe he was affirming homosexual activity.** If Jesus, as a Jewish rabbi, had been understood to disagree with the Jewish consensus about homosexuality, he would have been immediately and forcefully rejected by fishermen and Pharisees alike. The silence from Jesus' listeners on this point speaks powerfully: they saw no reason to think that Jesus affirmed homosexual behavior.

**If they didn't, why should we?**

**Thanks for reading. Comments are welcome, but thanks (again) for understanding that I have limited time for follow-up discussions.**

1. I say “explicitly” because I think Jesus actually *did* talk about it, and even came very close to naming it. I’ll explain more in post 4. Some who are lobbying for Christians to accept homosexuality think Jesus mentioned it, too. I’ll explain why I disagree with their claim in post 5. ↵
2. Richard Rohr, “Love Is Who You Are,” online article, adapted from Richard Rohr, *True Self/ False Self* (Franciscan Media: 2003), disc 2 (CD), Center for Action and Contemplation, August 11, 2016, <https://cac.org/love-is-who-you-are-2016-08-11/>, accessed September 7, 2019. ↵
3. Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), Kindle Edition, commentary on [Romans 1:24-27](#), emphasis added. Schreiner agrees: “Homosexual relations were not uncommon in the Greco-Romans world, while they were consistently frowned upon by Jews. Jews who practiced same-sex relations doubtless existed, but if they remained in Jewish society, they almost certainly kept it a secret to avoid social ostracism. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 87. ↵
4. S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams underscore this point: “Temple prostitution is addressed in the Old Testament, and particular language was available in Hebrew to reference it. It could, therefore, have been clearly mentioned here had the author wanted to limit the laws to that context... Other prohibitions of certain homosexual acts in the ancient Near East... do not oppose homosexuality in general; they refer to specific types of homosexual acts. If, then, these laws specified what was prohibited, why did [Lev 18:22](#) and [20:13](#) not specify particular kinds of homosexual acts? The answer to this question seems clear: *any* type of homosexual act was being prohibited.” ↵
5. Gane provides a more word-for-word translation of the phrase “as with a woman,” but comes to essentially the same conclusion: “Both instances of the ban on homosexuality contain the phrase ‘lyings (plural of *miskab*) of a woman’ (18:22; 20:13)... By itself this idiom is morally neutral... ‘Lyings’ are illicit when one party usurps the customary sexual activity (hence the plural, apparently) that rightfully belongs to another... In [Leviticus 18:22](#) and [20:13](#) the one who usurps a woman’s ‘lyings’ is any male.” Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 327-328. Kindle Edition. ↵
6. Gagnon identifies the same purpose in this concluding phrase: “The reason for the prohibition is evident from the phrase ‘lying with a male as though lying with a woman.’ What is wrong with same-sex intercourse is that it puts another male, at least insofar as the act of sexual intercourse is concerned, in the category of female rather than male... The non-procreative character of same-sex intercourse was no more the primary consideration in the rejection than it was for the proscription of bestiality. Incest and adultery, two other sexual acts rejected in [Leviticus 18](#) and [20](#) are certainly not wrong because they are non-procreative; but neither is the primary reason for their rejection that fact that children might arise. All three are wrong because they constitute sex with another who is either too much of an ‘other’ (sex with an animal) or too much of a ‘like’ (sex with a near kin and sex with a member of the same sex). These are transcultural creation categories, not superstitious dregs from a bygone era” (Robert Gagnon, “The Bible and Homosexual Practice: An Overview of Some Issues,” 2003, online article based on an interview with Zenit News Agency, March 21 and 28, 2002, pub. by OrthodoxyToday.org, <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles2/GagnonHomosexuality.php>, accessed August 28, 2019.) ↵
7. Several more observations confirm this: 1) It is very difficult to imagine a patriarchal society such as ancient Israel blessing lesbianism while prohibiting male homosexuality. 2) There is no evidence ancient Jews ever believed this law offered a loophole for lesbianism; rather, those who mentioned lesbianism spoke against it. 3) Ancient laws were paradigmatic rather than listing every conceivable situation (see [Appendix at end of forthcoming post three in this series](#)); thus, for example, the Ten Commandments, though addressed grammatically to males, apply equally to females. ↵
8. The translation of [Leviticus 20:13](#) by Jewish scholar Everett Fox confirms these interpretations: “A man who lies with a male (as one) lies with a woman—abomination have the two of them done, they are to be put-to-death, yes, death, their bloodguilt is upon them!” Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 607. Fox’s translation aims to convey the literary forms, word-plays, and rhetorical power of the underlying Hebrew. ↵



9. Yuan notes that the verbal parallel between Ezekiel and Leviticus actually involves a phrase, not just one word: "In Hebrew, 'abomination' is *toevah* and 'did' is *asah*. These two words appear next to each other not only in [Ezekiel 16:50](#), but also in [Leviticus 20:13](#). The prophet Ezekiel, inspired by the Holy Spirit, used these two words to connect Sodom's sin with [Leviticus 20:13](#)" (Christopher Yuan, book review of *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, by Justin Lee. The Gospel Coalition, January 7, 2013, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/torn/>, accessed September 5, 2019). It should be noted that Ezekiel uses *toevah* to refer to a wide range of sins, not only sexual ones. Further, *toevah* and *asah* are found together in multiple places in the OT, including elsewhere in Ezekiel, not only in these two verses. Nevertheless, given (a) that Sodom did commit sins of a homosexual nature, and (b) that homosexual acts were described using the same word pair "did-abomination" (*asah-toevah*) in [Leviticus 20:13](#), it seems probable that Ezekiel is thinking here of Sodom's acts of homosexuality. Duguid suggests the same possibility: "The sexual sin to which it gave its name" (sodomy) "may lie behind the 'detestable things' of [Ezekiel 16:50](#)" (Duguid, Iain M., *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary, p. 170. Zondervan. Kindle Edition).  
↵
10. *The Letter of Aristeas*, trans. H. T. Andrews, in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R. H. Charles (New York, NY: Clarendon, 1913), 83-122. Note: for these quotations of intertestamental Jewish literature, I am relying heavily on quotes and citations provided by S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams in *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016). See there book for the extended contexts of these quotes and for more. ↵
11. Pseudo-Phocylides, *Sentences*, 3 and 192, trans. P.W. van der Horst, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1985). ↵
12. Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 1:59, in *The Works of Philo Judaeus, the Contemporary of Josephus*, trans. C. D. Yonge, 4 vols. (London, England: Henry G. Bohn, 1854-55). ↵
13. "2 Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth, trans. F. I. Andersen (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 158. ↵
14. Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion* 2:199, trans. William J. Whiston (public domain, 1828). ↵
15. *Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 7.4, in Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 596. ↵
16. "The Testament of Jacob," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth, trans. W. F. Stinespring (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 917. ↵
17. "The Letter of Aristeas," Pseudo-Phocylides, Josephus, Mishnah. ↵
18. "A law of nature," Philo; "the limits set by nature," Pseudo-Phocylides. Some argue that the concept of "contrary to nature" meant "contrary to cultural custom." But this makes little sense of the term's use by those pagan Greeks who critiqued their own culture's widespread acceptance of same-sex relationships. It makes more sense to see the term, in both its Greek and its Jewish uses, as meaning roughly "contrary to physical design; contrary to the way things were made to work." In the Jewish context, this is equivalent to saying "contrary to how God created things to function." Paul uses the term in [Romans 1](#) in the context of explicitly referring to God as Creator. ↵
19. "Intercourse with men," "Letter of Aristeas"; "friend with friend in the anus," 2 Enoch; "the mixture of a male with a male," Josephus; "sexual relations... with a male," Mishnah; "sexual intercourse with males," "The Testament of Jacob." ↵
20. I cannot recall any example of when any Jew was surprised by Jesus' position on a sexual topic except when his own disciples were surprised at his rigid stance on divorce and remarriage. ↵
21. S. Donald Fortson III and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 235. ↵
22. *Ibid.*, 248. ↵
23. J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, volume 3 (New York, 2001), 502-503 as quoted in G. Thomas Hobson, "ἀσέλγεια in [Mark 7:22](#)," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 21 (2008), 73. ↵

24. Jesus *did* teach directly on adultery. But the times he mentioned adultery fall into two camps: times he cited adultery in passing in lists of well-known sins or commands (cf. Matt. 15:19; 19:18), and times when he expanded the “textbook” definition of adultery to include lust or wrongful divorce (cf. Matt. 5:28, 32). The latter were the only times he “exegeted” adultery, to use Meier’s term. ↵
25. Gagnon, *ibid.* Gagnon also summarizes what we can learn from Jesus’ “alleged silence”: There is no historical basis for arguing that Jesus might have been neutral or even favorable toward same-sex intercourse. All the evidence we have points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that Jesus would have strongly opposed same-sex intercourse had such behavior been a serious problem among first-century Jews.” ↵