Was Jesus Okay With Homosexuality? (4 of 6)

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In this post I want to challenge a popular assumption about Jesus and homosexuality. It is common knowledge that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality. That assertion is technically accurate based on our existing historical sources (though he said many things that were never recorded). Yet, as I explained in the second post in this series, it is a flimsy argument for saying Jesus was okay with homosexual behavior.

In this post I want to go further. **I plan to argue here that Jesus' Jewish listeners did indeed hear him speak against homosexual behavior, even though he may never have explicitly mentioned it.**

We've all seen it—that child who insists on interpreting their parents' instructions as narrowly as possible. Mommy says, "Don't draw on the wall!" So Daughter writes her name instead. "But Mommy, you didn't say I can't *write* on the wall. You just said I can't *draw* on the wall."

Or Daddy warns his children, "We have company coming in a few hours. Don't make a mess in the living room!" The children all start heading to their bedrooms to play except for one child. He tells his siblings, "Hey, Daddy didn't say we can't *play* in the living room. He just said 'don't make a mess.' Let's get our blocks and cars and build a town over there in the corner."

"I don't know… I don't think Daddy will like that," his siblings protest.

"But we'll keep it really neat. There won't be any mess. We'll be careful!"

So, the children get out their blocks and toy vehicles and stuffed animals. They carefully arrange an "orderly" town that soon sprawls across the entire room.

Daddy returns moments before the guests arrive, surveys the busy living room with surprise and frustration, and calls his children to attention. "But Daddy, this isn't a mess! We arranged it very carefully!" his son protests.

What do his siblings immediately say? "It was his idea! *We knew you didn't want us to bring our toys into the living room*, but he wouldn't listen!"

I suggest something similar is happening when we suggest that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. If Jesus' original Jewish audience could time-travel and speak with us, they would say, "*Of course Jesus spoke against homosexual behavior*! We heard him plainly!"

Three Ways Jesus Spoke About Homosexuality

What did Jesus' Jewish audience hear that we miss? What might we hear, too, if we listen as students of history rather than as combatants in a twenty-first century culture war? What teachings of Jesus might we be interpreting too woodenly? What did Jesus say that communicated his disapproval of homosexual behavior?

I suggest there are at least three ways Jesus referred to homosexual behavior, despite never explicitly naming it. I'll begin with the most general and move toward the most specific.

First, Jesus taught "You shall not commit adultery."

The Gospels record that Jesus explicitly cited this command at least twice (Matt. 5:27; 19:18), besides alluding to it on other occasions (Matt. 15:19; 19:9). It seems illogical to our minds, trained by Western legal traditions, to think that "do not commit adultery" could also mean "do not commit homosexual acts." But that is exactly how many ancient Jews thought.

We can perhaps begin to understand this way of thinking if we envision a Russian nesting doll(matryoshka doll), as in the following image.

A rough illustration of how ancient Jews thought of their paradigmatic law code. The more general commands (larger dolls) implied other related and more specific commands (smaller dolls nesting inside the bigger ones). In this way a person could sum up and include many "smaller" commands simply by citing a "bigger" one. (This diagram is adapted from an image by Monika Schröder from Pixabay.)

In Jewish thought, the more general commands of their law (the larger dolls) **implied other related and more specific commands** (the smaller dolls nesting inside the bigger ones). In this way a person could sum up and include many "smaller" commands simply by citing a "bigger" one.

Let's consider how "You shall not commit adultery" fits into this picture. This command was part of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. As the _Encyclopedia Judaica_ notes, "The Decalogue came to be regarded as a summary of biblical law."[1]

If the Ten Commandments were a _summary_ of God's law, then they could also function as an _outline_, with each of the Ten Commandments serving as headings for other related commands. This is exactly what happened. "Some [ancient Jewish] sources classify the 613 commandments of the Torah under the the headings of the commandments of the Decalogue."[2]

One person who thought this way was Philo, a Jewish philosopher alive at the same time as Jesus.**Philo asserted that "under" the commandment "against adulterers… many other commands are conveyed by implication**, such as that against seducers, that against practisers of unnatural crimes, that against all who live in debauchery, that against all men who indulge in illicit and incontinent connections."[3]

While discussing the Decalogue's commandment against adultery,**Philo specifically mentioned several forms of homosexual activity:**

> The law commands that the man-woman who adulterates the precious coinage of his nature shall die without redemption… And let the man who is devoted to the love of boys submit to the same punishment, since he pursues that pleasure which is contrary to nature… wasting his power of propagating his species, and moreover, being a guide and teacher of those greatest of all evils, unmanliness and effeminate lust… and last of all, because, like a worthless husbandman, he allows fertile and productive lands to lie fallow.[4]

There is evidence within the New Testament that Jesus and his apostles shared this approach to interpreting the Law of Moses. Jesus, for example, cited the two great commandments (love of God and love of neighbor) and then said that "all the Law and the Prophets" depend on (hang from, are derived from) "these two commandments" (Matt. 22:40).

Paul similarly suggested the Ten Commandments are encapsulated within the great commandments:

> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up [summarized] in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"(Rom. 13:9).

Jesus seems to have applied this kind of thinking specifically to adultery. For example, Jesus, like some other rabbis of the time, taught a broad definition of adultery that included the attitude of the heart: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that **everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery** with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28).

Jesus even "expanded" adultery to include actions that were contrary to God's creation design but which had specifically been given loopholes by the Law of Moses:

> Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: **whoever divorces his wife**, except for sexual immorality, **and marries another, commits adultery**" (Matt. 19:8-9).

Under *adultery* then, Jesus also forbade other sexual sins such as *lust* and *divorce*.

If we combine Jesus' and Paul's statements, we could say that inside of "Love your neighbor" is found "You shall not commit adultery," and inside of "You shall not commit adultery" are both "Do not look at a woman with lustful intent" and "Do not divorce"—and, Philo adds, "Do not engage in homosexual behavior."

Robert Gagnon summarizes this ancient Jewish way of reading "You shall not commit adultery":

> The Decalogue commandment against adultery was treated as a broad rubric prohibiting all forms of sexual practice that deviated from the creation model in Genesis 1-2, including homoerotic intercourse.[5]

Given this way of thinking about laws, **it is likely that ancient Jews would have understood Jesus to be prohibiting all sorts of unlawful sexual activity, including homosexual activity, when he taught "You shall not commit adultery."**

*(This way of thinking is radically different from our Western legal tradition. Our legal codes are exhaustive, and any action not explicitly banned remains legal. Ancient law codes were paradigmatic, and people were expected to extrapolate from the examples given to all similar situations. For help in understanding these differences and how they impact the commands we are discussing here, **see the appendix at the end of this article**)*

Second, Jesus taught against πορνεία (*porneia*).

This Greek word is found on Jesus' lips in both Matthew and Mark's Gospels[6] Jesus listed πορνεῖαι (plural) among the defiling sins that proceed from the human heart:

> What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, **sexual immorality**… (Matt. 15:18-19; cf. Mark 7:21)

Πορνεία (*porneia*) is commonly translated "sexual immorality." It is a broad term which refers to "every kind of extramarital, unlawful, unnatural sexual intercourse."[7]

New Testament scholar James Edwards says that πορνεία "can be found in Greek literature with reference to a variety of illicit sexual practices, including adultery, fornication, prostitution, and homosexuality."[8]

When Jesus spoke against πορνεία, he was speaking to Jews, not Greeks. What kinds of sexual activity would they have considered unlawful or illegitimate? **Would Jews have considered homosexual behavior to be πορνεία?**

We don't have to guess. In the Septuagint (the Greek OT translated about 200 B.C.), πορνεία was used "for any sexual practice outside marriage between a man and a woman that is prohibited by the Torah" (Edwards).[9] Homosexual activity certainly fits this description.

Remember the conclusion reached by Fortson and Grams regarding Jewish writings near the time of Jesus:

> Jews consistently condemned homosexual practice of any sort… Jews understood the Old Testament to speak against homosexual behavior, and they accepted biblical authority in matters of sexual ethics.[10]

And remember how Keener summarized Jewish practices from the same period:

> Jewish people… unanimously rejected homosexual behavior… Jewish homosexual practice was nearly unknown.[11]

Given this historical context, Gagnon's summary is no surprise: "**In Jesus' day, and for many centuries before and thereafter, *porneia* was universally understood in Judaism to include same-sex intercourse.**"[12] The related verb ἐκπορνεύω[13] is even used in the NT to describe what Sodom and Gomorrah did: "indulged in sexual immorality" (Jude 1:7).

What would Jesus' Jewish listeners say to us today if we suggested he never said anything about homosexual behavior? "Of course he did!" they might respond. "We clearly heard him warn against πορνεία!"

Third, Jesus taught against ἀσέλγεια (*aselgeia*).

Mark includes this word in his record of Jesus' teaching about sins that come out of the heart:

> From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, **sensuality**… (Mark 7:21-22)

Ἀσέλγεια is sometimes translated "sensuality" (ESV, NASB). But that expression hardly carries the negative connotation in today's "sexy" world that ἀσέλγεια apparently carried among ancient Jews. "Lewdness" (NIV) or "debauchery" (NET) come closer. While πορνεία was used widely to refer to all kinds of unlawful sexual intercourse, ἀσέλγεια seems to have been used more narrowly to refer to sexual sins that Jews considered especially shameful.

G. Thomas Hobson surveys the usage of the word ἀσέλγεια in classical Greek, pre-New Testament, and post-New Testament contexts in his 2008 journal article "ἀσέλγεια in Mark 7:22." His findings are worth quoting at length:

> It's a word that Jesus… could easily turn to as a synonym for homosexual activity and other similarly shocking behavior forbidden by the Jewish law… **ἀσέλγεια was πορνεία… taken to its most disgusting degree**… The term may have been used to refer to what were regarded as the most shameless violations of the sexuality taught in the Torah.
>
> It would appear that the writer of Mark, writing for a general audience, saw a need to spell out an element of Jesus' teaching that addressed a sexual lifestyle issue among Gentiles, a matter that was less of an issue for Matthew's predominately Jewish audience. Furthermore, for some reason, neither πορνεία ["sexual immorality"] nor μοιχεία ["adultery"] specifically addressed the sexual sin he had in mind. **It is likely… that Jesus was speaking of violations of the Torah such as homosexual behavior, incest, or bestiality**, rather than comparatively less shocking sins such as adultery and fornication.[14]

In fact, **there is one place in the New Testament (2 Pet. 2:7) where the word ἀσέλγεια is used explicitly to refer to the actions of people who were homosexuals**. Hobson again:

> Second Peter uses ἀσέλγεια more than any other NT document. It links ἀσέλγεια explicitly with the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, picturing Lot (2 Pet 2,7) as "greatly distressed by the licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια) of the wicked" around him. [15]

Given this usage of ἀσέλγεια, what might Jesus have meant by the term in Mark 7:22? Hobson once more:

> Exactly what did Jesus consider to be "utter shamelessness"? What did he consider too far "over the line"? The danger is to impose twenty-first century AD politically correct ideas on Jesus… In context, **it is far more likely that Jesus had in mind what his fellow Jews** (like the author of 2 Peter) **meant when they used the word: images of Sodom and Gomorrah, images of outrageous violation of the one-flesh union of man and woman**…
>
> If Jesus had wished to speak of homosexual behavior in his list of sins that defile the human heart, to what other word could Mark have turned in his translation? Παιδεραστία ["paederasty," from "love-of-boys"] was too narrow a term. Ἀρσενοκοίτης ["man-bedder"] had barely been coined by Paul. And πορνεία ["sexual immorality"] is too broad a concept, although it is the only word Matthew chooses to use in his version of Jesus' sin list. **Ἀσέλγεια was an ideal word for identifying both homosexual behavior and other similar sexual sins of which even the Mishnah was reticent to speak any more than was absolutely necessary**…
>
> The appearance of ἀσέλγεια on the lips of Mark's Jesus must be accounted for somehow, and it will not do to say that a word of such shock value as ἀσέλγεια was a throw-away detail, or was intended as nothing more than a synonym for πορνεία ["sexual immorality"] or μοιχεία ["adultery"]… It is argued here that, as he seeks to faithfully communicate Jesus' teaching, **Mark found it necessary to emphasize to his readers that Jesus did explicitly reaffirm the Torah's prohibition of the most shocking sexual offenses.**[16]

Again, what might Jesus' Jewish listeners say to us today if they heard us suggest Jesus never said anything about homosexual activity? "Of course he did!" they might respond. "We clearly heard him mention ἀσέλγεια!"

And, of course, it is clear that Jesus' first followers *did* indeed understand that homosexual behavior was incompatible with following Jesus. (I'll share more of that evidence in my final post.)

Conclusion

A primary goal of this blog series is to help us interpret Jesus within his own ancient Jewish historical context. If we read his silence, his speech, and his actions as if he were our next-door neighbor or even a twenty-first century rabbi, we are sure to reach conclusions that are historically invalid at best and dangerously deceptive at worst.

It is frequently claimed that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality. That may be technically true according to our post-Scientific Revolution, post-Enlightenment way of reading science journals and law codes. But it is also very misleading according to ancient Jewish ways of talking about laws and sins.

Jesus' general language condemning sexual immorality would have been understood by his original listeners to prohibit all mutually-recognized sexual sins—including homosexual activity as surely as bestiality, pedophilia, incest, and many other activities he also "failed" to mention.

Any ancient Jew would have concluded that Jesus did indeed address the topic of homosexual behavior. He did so when he taught about adultery, even more so when he mentioned *πορνεία*, and especially when he warned about *ἀσέλγεια*.

Are you able to hear Jesus through ancient Jewish ears? <u>If you have a comment, please leave it below.</u> And thanks for reading! I realize the posts in this series take some time to read and absorb, and I hope you have found the time worthwhile.

Appendix:
The Implications of Ancient Law Codes

The following is excerpted from "The Paradigmatic Nature of Biblical Law," an excursus in Douglas Stuart's commentary on Exodus:[17]

"Modern societies generally have opted for exhaustive law codes. That is, every action modern society wishes to regulate or prohibit must be specifically mentioned in a separate law… By this approach, all actions are permitted that are not expressly forbidden or regulated. Thus it is not uncommon that criminals in modern Western societies evade prosecution because of a 'technicality' or a 'loophole' in the law…

"Ancient laws did not work this way. They were paradigmatic, giving models of behaviors and models of prohibitions/punishments relative to those behaviors, but they made no attempt to be exhaustive. Ancient laws gave guiding principles, or samples, rather than complete descriptions of all things regulated. Ancient people were expected to be able to extrapolate from what the sampling of laws did say to the *general* behavior the laws in their totality pointed toward… Ancient judges were expected to extrapolate from the wording provided in the laws that did exist to *all other* circumstances and not to be foiled in their jurisprudence by any such concepts as 'technicalities' or 'loopholes'… The Israelites had to learn to see the underlying principles in any law and not let the specifics of the individual casuistic citation mislead them into applying the law too narrowly…

"It is in connection with the paradigmatic nature of Israel's covenant law that Jesus, following the established tradition in Judaism, could make so sweeping an assertion as that two laws sum up all the rest… Properly understood, two laws do indeed sum up *everything* in the entire legal corpus of the Old Testament. So do ten laws (the Ten Words/Commandments); so do all six hundred and thirteen… If a reasonable number of comprehensive and comprehensible laws… are provided to a people as paradigms for proper living, there is no excuse for that people to claim ignorance of how to behave or to claim innocence when their sins are found out.

"Most laws are expressed as commands in the masculine singular—the*you* of the laws is 'you, a male person'— from a technical, grammatical point of view. But here again the reader/listener would not have the slightest ground to say, 'It prohibits individual men from doing such and such, but I'm a woman/we're a group, so the wording of the law exempts me/us.' Implicit in the wording is the need for paradigmatic extrapolation to all persons, singular or plural, male or female…

"Without an awareness of all six hundred and thirteen commandments and seeing within them the high standards of God's holiness… a person corrupted by a fallen world does not easily get the point of what the two great commandments are intended to summarize. Once one has learned the breadth and depth of God's expectations for his holy people, however, the two greatest commandments serve brilliantly as comprehensive reminders of all that is expected of God's covenant people."

In his discussion of the Ten Commandments, Stuart applies this understanding to command about adultery:

"**This commandment does not explicitly condemn** premarital sex, postmarital sex (as by a widow or widower), cohabitation without formal marriage, bestiality, or incest, all of which are dealt with elsewhere in various ways; **but *by implication* it certainly does condemn all those practices**... Again the principle of law as paradigmatic is essential for appreciating the implications of this command: reasonable and careful extrapolation from the paradigm of the adultery law yields the realization that all sex outside of marriage, whether before, during, after, or instead of a person's actual legal marriage would be a violation of the divine covenant... The commandment also argues, implicitly, against divorce. If marriage is so important that is must be protected against adulteration—even the sort of adulteration that might occur in brief interludes—it certainly is important enough to protect against dissolution altogether."[18]

1. "Decalogue," David Kadosh, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, The Gale Group, 2008, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/decalogue, accessed August 2, 2019. ↵
2. David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 351. ↵
3. Philo, *The Decalogue*, XXXII. (168), http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book26.html, accessed September 2, 2019. ↵
4. Philo, *The Special Laws*, Book 3, VII. (38, 39). English source: http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book29.html Greek source: http://khazarzar.skeptik.net/books/philo/specialg.pdf, pp. 82-83, accessed September 2, 2019. Philo's comment about a "man-woman" seems to be concerned with men who change their appearance and actions to be like women. As for his comment about "the man who is devoted to the love of boys, it is worth noting that Philo does not seem concerned about child abuse or sexual abuse in any modern sense of those terms. Rather, the concerns he mentions are that such unions (1) are "contrary to nature," (2) contribute to population decline, (3) train boys to be effeminate, and (4) cause women to remain barren. As with other ancient Jewish authors, the question of consensuality apparently was not a prime factor for Philo in evaluating the ethics of homosexual unions; other factors weighed more, and could not be overruled by the presence of consent. ↵
5. 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. ↵
6. It is likely that Jesus did much of his teaching in Aramaic, in which case the Gospel writers (or the sources upon which they drew) chose which Greek words to use. Historians generally agree, however, that their translations reliably convey the message of Jesus' teaching. ↵
7. See Geoff Ashley's survey of definitions of πορνεία in "Jesus and Homosexuality," online article, The Village Church, https://www.tvcresources.net/resource-library/articles/jesus-and-homosexuality, accessed September 2, 2019. Compare also with the usage noted in BAGD (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker): "of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse." Mounce similarly notes that "the word group to which *porneia* belongs generally relates to any kind of illegitimate sexual intercourse" (*Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*). ↵
8. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 213. ↵
9. Ibid. ↵
10. 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. ↵
11. 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. ↵
12. Gagnon, Ibid. ↵
13. The relationship between the words can be glimpsed even by someone who dooes not read Greek; compare πορνεία and ἐκπορνεύω, or, in transliteration, *porneia* and *ekporneuo*. ↵

14. G. Thomas Hobson, "ἀσέλγεια in <u>Mark 7:22</u>," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 21 (2008), 65, 67, 70, bold added. See here for the full article: <u>https://www.academia.edu/31907497/ASELGEIA_IN_MARK_7_22</u>. See also this summary by Richard Klaus: "Jesus Did Mention Homosexuality!" online article, White Rose Review, October, 2014, <u>https://whiterosereview.blogspot.com/2014/10/jesus-did-mention-homosexuality.html</u>, accessed September 2, 2019. ↵

15. Ibid., 68. ↵

16. Ibid., 72-74, bold added. ↵

17. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus,* New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 442-444. ↵

18. Ibid., 464-65, bold added. ↵