

Dear Jerri, #3

Last week I looked at the second creation story from Genesis 2. Per its conclusion, the story seems to have the function of explaining the origin of the Hebrew practice of a man leaving his home and beginning a new family unit. The Genesis story only explains why a man leaves his home, not the woman. Why? Because it is a story that is deeply embedded in, and reflective of, a culture that did not need any rationale for why a woman leaves a home. *We cannot escape the culturally embedded assumptions that are laced throughout these stories.* The way to be faithful is not to pretend that those cultural assumptions are not there, but to acknowledge that they are *and* to admit that we do not share some of them. That's okay, because when we read the Scriptures we will find that some of the texts do not share all of the cultural assumptions of other texts either.

This week, I'd like to look at Leviticus 18:22, which reads: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an *abomination*." The same sentiment is repeated in Leviticus 20:13. Here is how I want to approach this verse this week: I want to see how the Old Testament uses the word "abomination." It is such a powerful word that seems to mean the most horrific of sinfulness. At least that's how it is presented by people who are decrying one thing or another.

There are 102 uses of the word "abomination" in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Of the 102, all but 4 are in the Old Testament. Reading them all,¹ I have seen some interesting things. The first use is in Genesis 43:32, which explains why Joseph did not eat with his brothers, saying "the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians." Think about that. The Egyptians had their abominations, which the Hebrews certainly did not share. In other words, abominations are culturally and religiously specific, not universal truths that are equally valid for all peoples.

In the main except for the book of Proverbs, 'abomination' refers to three types of practices: Practices around sex, around food, and around the worship that marked the religions of Israel's neighbors (and sometimes the people of Israel themselves). In fact, in many cases those three types of practices seem interrelated.

Leviticus refers to abomination 10 times, 5 of which are in chapter 18. Two of those references are about same-sex relations. Four of them are summary statements about practices of the people who lived in the Promised Land before the Hebrews. The rest seem to be about food. Two of them call the practice of eating meat on the third day after it is offered as a sacrifice an abomination. (Eating that meat the first two days is fine.) The last two uses distinguish between clean and unclean birds; the unclean are an abomination as offerings or food. Some people have argued that the same-sex relationships that are called an 'abomination' in Leviticus are actually temple-centered acts of pagan worship. First Kings 14:24 makes an explicit

¹ You can use the web site bible.oremus.org and scroll down to where you can enter a word or phrase to search, and key in 'abomination' and see them all for yourself. It will show 114 uses in total, because it includes books that we consider the Apocrypha.

reference to this when speaking of the evil religious practices under King Rehoboam: “There were also male temple prostitutes in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” We will look at Leviticus 18 more closely next week, but for now, consider the flow of these references to “abomination” in Leviticus generally.

Flesh-eating birds, like eagles, osprey, and vultures, were part of God’s creation and were not, in themselves, considered abominations. Likewise, unclean animals – some birds, some creepy crawlers – are part of creation and are not, in themselves, considered abominations. Unclean animals were named as passengers on Noah’s ark! However, eagles, etc., were considered “abominations” *as food*. Unclean animals were considered “abominations” when presented *as offerings*. It is quite possible that – just as eagles are only abominations as food or unclean animals are only abominations as sacrifices – the same-sex relations that are called abominations are specific to the male temple prostitute sort, not same-sex relations in general. In light of how the writers of Leviticus use the term “abomination,” not as something abominable in itself, but only in its dietary or religious function, we have to at least hold it as a possibility that the “abomination” of same-sex relations is specific to male prostitution or male temple prostitution.

Moving on, the book of Proverbs uses “abomination” 19 times, mostly about scoffers and cheating scales, but none of them is about same-sex relations. Jeremiah uses it 11 times, most often about idolatry, which may have included literal prostitution or maybe prostitution is a metaphor for being unfaithful to God. Ezekiel, however, is the mother lode of “abomination” in the Bible, with 31 references – almost 1/3 of the Old Testament uses. Ezekiel 16:2-22 is an extended, almost narrational account of Jerusalem’s “abominations.” The references are often undefined, but when they are defined they are a curious mix of literal and metaphorical sexual references. None of them, however, is a reference to same-sex relations.

On the whole, of the 102 references to “abomination” in the Old Testament, only the two references in Leviticus refer to same-sex relationships. So, that’s where we will focus next week.

~ ***The Rev. Dr. D. Mark Davis***