

Dear Jerri, #4

Today I want to look closely at Leviticus 18, probably the most relied on text for anyone who feels that same-sex relationships are wrong, no matter how loving or affirming they might be to those who participate in them. It is Leviticus 18:22 that says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” That is raw and specific language. We saw last week how I Kings 14:24 made reference to temple-centered male prostitution and I suggested that this cultic practice may be behind the reference in Leviticus to homosexual activity. The reason I make that connection is because of some structural parallels between Leviticus 18 and I Kings 14, particularly the reference to how some practices that are wrong for the Israelites are practices that were common among other cultures. The second half of I Kings 14:24 says, “They committed all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” That reference to the “abominations” of other nations is exactly what Leviticus 18 is all about. So, let’s look at those abominations – and get ready for a surprise.

Leviticus 18:3 states the point of the chapter: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes.”¹ This emphasis is repeated at the end of the chapter in v.30, “So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God.” Please note that, while homosexual activity is specified as an “abomination” in v.22, this summary verse 30 declares *all* of the sexual relationships in this chapter to be “abominations.” And here are the abominable sexual relationships that are forbidden, usually with the euphemistic phrase, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of” Generally speaking the chapter forbids uncovering the nakedness of anyone near of kin. Of course, “near of kin” is a very broad and vague category. Later, priests were required to marry within their extended family, so the listings of Leviticus 18 seem to specify how near is ‘near.’

So, here is the list of those whose nakedness one is not to uncover: One’s father; One’s mother; One’s step-mother; One’s sister; One’s half-sister, born at home or abroad; One’s granddaughter; One’s half-sister (again); One’s paternal or maternal aunt, blood-related or by marriage; One’s daughter-in-law; One’s brother’s wife; Both a woman and her daughter or her granddaughter; One’s wife’s sister, as long as the wife is living; A menstruating woman. In addition, the people of Israel were forbidden from having sexual relations with a kinsman’s wife (using slightly different language than before), from sacrificing their children to Molech, from a man lying with a man as with a woman, and from sex with animals.

Now, here is the surprise I promised. If you read through the rest of the Old Testament, you can see a number of folks who violated these standards of holiness by having precisely the kinds of sexual relations that Leviticus 18 prohibits. My non-exhaustive list:

¹ Most scholars note that this chapter – part of the “Holiness Code” of chapters 17-26 – was written *long after* the actual journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, perhaps during or after the exile. *Within the story*, these laws are given on the journey. In real life, they were compiled and expressed as a unit many years later, perhaps more in response to having lived among Babylonians than Egyptians.

Abraham – married to his Sarah, his half-sister.

Lot – having sex, unwittingly since he was drunk, with his two daughters.

Jacob – married to sisters Leah and Rachel while both were living.

Judah – having sex with his daughter-in-law Tamar. In his defense, he thought she was just a regular prostitute.

Reuben – maybe. Technically, he slept with his father’s concubine, not his wife.

David – married to two of King Saul’s daughters. Maybe. There is some discrepancy in the stories. David might also have kidnapped and married one of Saul’s wives. The man was a walking soap opera.

Ammon – David’s son who raped his half-sister.

As we can see, some of the sexual relations that are expressly considered “abominations” in Leviticus 18 were not referred to as such elsewhere and, in some cases, were perfectly acceptable ways of mating. In other cases, they were considered sinful, but for reasons specific to their story, not because they violated the rules of Leviticus 18.

Please understand, I am not suggesting that Leviticus 18 has no place in our conversations about sexual ethics. I am suggesting that Leviticus 18 is not the “open and shut biblical case” against same-sex relationships that it is often pretended to be. It is *one presentation among others* in the Bible regarding acceptable sexual relationships and it is clearly contradicted elsewhere in the Bible about what constitutes acceptable sexual relationships. More importantly, while the *topic* of this chapter is primarily sexuality, the overall *purpose* of this section of Leviticus is to establish Israel as different than the other nations surrounding them through their sexual ethics, as well as how they eat, dress, shave, and worship.

Next week I want to move to the New Testament and see whether this complex portrait of sexual relationships in the Old Testament is made clearer.

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