

Homosexuality in the New Testament:

Arsenokoitai and Malakoi

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2017

Abstract:

In this paper I will study the issue of Paul's condemnation of homosexuality in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. By looking at the ancient Greek views of sexuality and the practice of pederasty and by looking at the meanings and usage of the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, I will attempt to show that Paul condemn all forms of consensual homosexual intercourse (active and passive) not just slavery, prostitution or pederasty.

Introduction:

Homosexuality is one the most controversial topics in today's society. Due to this, homosexuality has become one of the most studied and discussed theological topics. Opponents to homosexuality would argue that the Scriptures are clear on the subject while proponents would argue that the issues are not clearly dealt with in Scripture. Many proponents, or revisionists, argue that the situations we face today are dramatically different to the homosexual relationships of Paul's day. They argue, therefore, that we need to revisit the Scriptures in light of these differences. Whether or not the issue of homosexuality, then and now, is dramatically different, when discussing issues like this it is always valuable to look at the historical context in which the texts were written.

Many revisionists have rejected the traditional theological stance on homosexuality and instead have proposed alternative interpretations. Examples of revisionists arguments include: the Levitical laws concerning homosexuality were only concerned with ritual purity, Paul's comments in Romans about exchanging natural lusts do not pertain to people born with a homosexual orientation but to those with heterosexual orientation who engaged in homosexual acts, or the words *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10) and *malakoi* (1Cor. 6:9) do not relate to consensual homosexual relationships but to the ancient Greek practice of pederasty. This last argument is the one which I now wish to discuss further.

Pederasty and Greek Sexuality

In ancient Greece males were seen as superior to women and the love of a man was seen as a more intimate, noble and superior form of love than that of a woman. In ancient Greek culture sex with a woman was considered inferior to sex with a man. (Coleman: 117) Men slept with their wives only when they wished to conceive a child. If a man wished to have sex for the sake of enjoyment he would sleep with either a female prostitute or with a male companion, the latter of which was seen as the nobler form. While same-sex relationships between women existed they were generally frowned upon by society as two inferiors engaging in an inferior form of sexual intercourse. Within Greek culture same-sex relationships between men usually existed in the form of pederasty.

Pederasty was a practice which flourished in the time of Plato (428-347 BC), possibly dating as early as Homer (800's to 1200's BC) and continued well into the early centuries AD. Pederasty, which was

most common in Athens but existed through Greece, was largely a part of philosophical upbringing and a form of male initiation. “It is probably right to stress the emphasis on education, and the particular sense that the Greeks had of affectionate friendship as the means of learning.” (Coleman: 116) The initiation process of men consisted of an education of art, poetry, music, pederasty and also sex which female prostitutes, all designed to mature the young men sexually and socially. “It was truly a matter of initiation, in which a boy, with the guidance of an adult, would mature into a man in both sexual and social senses.” (Nissinen: 58)

Pederasty comes from the Greek word *paiderastia*, which means ‘love for boys’. Pederasty is not the same as modern day paedophilia and must be understood in its own cultural context. Pederasty was generally consensual as it was regarded as an essential part of a young man’s upbringing and was widely accepted as a cultural norm. In addition to this, the *erastes*, or elder lover, had to earn the love of the *eromenos*, or beloved younger, through education, service, gifts and feats of heroism. Pederasty was considered the noblest form of love more intimate than marriage, resulting in a deep male friendship and spiritual satisfaction for both parties.

Young men participated in the passive role during puberty, usually 12-17 years old, and would outgrow this role once they began to grow a beard. They would then proceed into manhood where they could now take the active role with their own *eromenos*. In Philo’s *On the Contemplative Life* he mentioned that the young men, former pets of the pederasts, were now just beginning to show beards. (:702)

The process of pederasty was a delicate balancing act in which the older man had to teach the boy of the “joy” of male-male love, but at the same time he was to avoid corrupting the boy to the point of turning him into a *kinaidos*. (Loader 2012: 83) A *kinaidos*, which means ‘consumed’, is a man consumed with a lust for the passive (feminine) role and who enjoys penetration. Pederasty was not about sexual gratification but about education and the “beauty” of male-male love, not lust. The practice had very strict cultural expectations. “Relationships with boys was a delicate issue managed with a subtle moral code.” (Nissinen: 69) The older men were meant to be seen as strong courageous active mentors. The younger men were to be seen as dutiful soft passive students. They were to be soft and passive but were not to desire a passive role or become effeminate. Nissinen points out that there is a difference between a *malakoi*, the passive pederast partner, and a *kinaidos*, an effeminate call-boy (male prostitute). (:117)

The boy’s role as a passive partner was meant to be seen as a dutiful service in return for his mentor’s training and education. The *eromenos* was never to take cash for sex, initiate the encounter or to enjoy the encounter (:68), a boy was not to lust penetration nor get an erection from the encounter (: fig. 9a). Hence, pederasty was not rape, as the boy consented to the practice but he was not to enjoy it nor be aroused by it. To assume the passive role outside of the “noble art” of pederasty was culturally condemned. *Kinaidos*, call-boys/male prostitutions, were considered lowly and inferior, as they were seen as women, who were also considered to be inferior. While the use of a *kinaidos* was not looked down upon in Greek society, no man was ever to aspire to be one. Even *malakoi*, the passive partner,

while seen as a noble role, no man was to aspire to a passive role but simple to perform ones cultural duty. In ancient Greek culture a person's genitalia did not determine their gender. A person's gender was identified by whether they took the active (male) or passive (female) role in sexual intercourse, (Loader: 86) the passive role was deemed feminine, inferior and looked down upon. The passive role was considered a duty not a desire. The mentor "guided" the younger man into manhood and the younger rendered a service for the older man. In this way the older man could experience sexual pleasure without the risk of pregnancy and could also experience the "more superior" love of a male. As mentioned above, pederasty was seen as a delicate process in which the *erastes* was to guide the *eromenos* into manhood through sexual experiences (either by anal sex or by insertion between the thighs). But the older was not meant to corrupt the younger to the point that the boy began to crave penetration and became a *kinaidos*. According to Loader, this kind of corruption was an aberration but it did occur. (:85)

In Philo's *The Special Laws III* he condemns the practice of pederasty for its corruption of young boys who grew up to be "men-women" craving effeminacy (which seemed to be a common occurrence in his opinion). Philo states that this sin of pederasty is not only boasted among those who practice it but those who suffer from its affects. He states that the boys, now men, after having been treated like women wasted away their body and soul and lost the flame of manhood. That these boys admired the pleasures of their youth and desired wholly to become women even to the point of castration and the wearing of woman's clothes, makeup and long hair (i.e. transgenderism).

Greek culture looked down upon these men-women, since femineity was seen as inferior and men were not to aspire to the passive role. Philo condemns such men, stating that they are worthy of death and should die without redemption - which sounds very similar to Paul's condemnation that *malakoi* would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9,10). Philo also condemns the active male counterpart, stating that he "who is devoted to the love of boys" should be subjected to the same fate. (:598) Philo condemns these men firstly because they pursue unnatural desires and because this practice cannot result in procreation, and secondly because these mentors guided young men into the greatest of all evils, stripping young men of their beauty, wasting the prime of their life and leading them into effeminacy.

From this study it seems evident that the homosexual practices in ancient Greece are vastly different to the practices of today. Most notably the passive role of sexuality (done by males or females) was seen as inferior and not to be admired. "In Greek culture the position of women was inferior and homosexual love was exalted." (Coleman: 117) While consensual mutual homosexual relationships between mature adult males, and females, existed, they were not looked upon with favour. (Loader: 83) And while homosexual relations with a male prostitute (*kinaidos*) were not condemned, it was the "noble" act of pederasty which was exalted in this culture. Pederasty cannot be considered the same as paedophilia, as the purpose and understanding of the act are culturally bound, and was seen mostly as a consensual form of mentoring and education.

In light of these facts, I now wish to examine Paul's usage of the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* and discuss what implications they hold for homosexuality today.

Arsenokoitai and Malakoi

In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul lists a number of sinners that will not inherit the kingdom of God. Among this list are idolaters, adulterers, thieves, drunkards etc. Also among this list are two terms that relate to homosexuality *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, traditionally understood to be the active and passive roles in homosexual intercourse. In 1 Timothy 1:9-10 Paul gives another list of lawless, disobedient, ungodly sinners. He states that the Law of God is not given to the righteous but to the lawless, including murderers, slave traders, liars and again *arsenokoitai* (this time not accompanied by *malakoi*).

Paul makes it clear that such acts are sinful and the law is given for such sinners. However, in light of the sexual practices of ancient Greece it is important to try and determine what is meant by *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in order to determine what he considers sinful.

According to Gagnon (:314-315) the meaning of *arsenokoitai* has, in some cases, been narrowed to refer only to those exploitative forms of active homosexuality (pederasty or prostitution), and in other cases broadened to refer to heterosexuals who engage in homosexual practices. As for *malakoi*, some scholars have restricted it to *kinaidos*, either male prostitutes or transgendered males (Gagnon: 310), and some suggest that it refers to cowardice or weakness or to masturbation. (Loader: 328)

Gagnon, like many scholars, believes that Paul's condemnation cannot be widened to include heterosexuals nor narrowed to exclude non-exploitative forms of homosexuality (:338) and as Loader states "it must mean more than general effeminacy." (:328) These scholars have numerous reasons to support their views but three reasons in particular keep emerging: 1. the specific words which are chosen, 2. the origins of the words, and 3. the pairing of the words.

Firstly, the words that Paul uses are broad terms that are inclusive of all forms of active and passive homosexuality. If Paul sought to condemn pederasty, then why didn't he just use the word *paidierastia*? (Gagnon: 325, Coleman: 96, DeYoung, 65) The word for pederasty existed in the Greek language; Philo used it repeatedly in his condemnations of the practice.

As for *malakoi*, if Paul sought to condemn male prostitution or transgenderism, then why didn't he use the word *kinaidos*, the word used for such men? Instead he uses a term that encompasses all forms of passive male partners. Philo, who was a fellow First Century AD Jew, applies *malakoi* to passive partners in general and does not confine it to "call-boys" (Barnett: 108) Since Paul was a First Century AD Jew, like Philo, logic would dictate that the two scholars would use the word *malakoi* in the same way.

Secondly, when Paul mentions the active partner he does not use the term for pederast but instead he uses a term that had not existed in literature prior to his writings. *Arsenokoitai* is a "neologism, occurring for the first time in extant literature" in Paul's two letters. (Gagnon: 312-3) *Arsenokoitai* comes from two words *arsen*, meaning 'male', and *koite*, meaning 'bed', referring to the marriage

bed, and literally means ‘male-bedders’. The word is believed to be a Hellenistic Jewish term coined from the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, where the Law forbids that a male lies (*koiten*) with a male (*arenos*), as one does a female. The Jews understood Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to refer to all acts of homosexuality, and that the active role was performed by an adult but that the passive role could include either an adult or a minor. Hence *arsenokoitai* cannot simply be restricted to pederasty. (Gagnon: 316)

Thirdly, “that *arsenokoitai* refers to same-sex intercourse is strengthened by the pairing with *malakoi*.” (Gagnon: 316) As Loader states these two words belong together as a pair. When we view *malakoi* in light of the meaning of *arsenokoitai* it shows that it refers to all who willingly engaged in the act, not just male prostitutes, but consenting partners. (:331) It can be seen from Paul’s pairing and usage of these words in 1 Corinthians that he is referring to all forms of consensual homosexual relationships, including not only pederasty and prostitution but also committed homosexual relationships.

However, what of 1 Timothy? 1 Timothy lacks *malakoi*. Many scholars have attempted to pair it with the next word ‘slave-traders’ (*andrapodistais*, literally ‘men-stealers’), and argues that here Paul is condemning those who trade male sex-slaves (particular young men). There is no definitive proof that these two words are meant to be paired together (since one uses *arsenos*, meaning ‘male’, and the other *andros*, meaning ‘man’). However, it is not impossible, especially since the absence of *malakoi* would signal that in this case Paul is condemning the active partners only. It is also possible for Paul to have different situations in mind when using the word *arsenokoitai*, especially since Corinth and Ephesus (Timothy’s community) are very different places and experience very different sins, evident in the different lists. (1 Cor. 6:9,10, 1 Tim. 1:9,10)

Henceforth, it is possible that the mention of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Timothy was related to a more exploitive form of active homosexuality. However, this would not include pederasty as pederasty was not seen as exploitative, at least not in the same sense as prostitution and slavery. As we can learn from the philosophers and Philo, pederasty was seen as a form of education, praised by the Greeks and condemned by the Jews.

Implications for the Modern Day

“It is self-evident, then, that the combination of terms, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, are correctly understood in our contemporary context when they are applied to every conceivable type of same-sex intercourse.” (Gagnon: 330)

By studying the Greek views on sexuality and the practice of pederasty, and by studying the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, I believe that Paul’s condemnations in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy are related to all forms of consensual homosexual intercourse, including prostitution, pederasty (both active and passive roles) and committed relationships.

Paul’s comment about not inheriting the kingdom shows engagement and willingness, he is not condemning *malakoi* in the neutral sense (slaves), but men who willingly take the passive role. (Loader:

328) When it comes to the practice of pederasty and to the *eromenos*, boys who willingly slept with older men, in one sense they are sinning due to their consensual passivity. But they were a product of their culture and society. The boys were not raped in the forceful sense and did willingly participate in the practice, but they lived in a corrupted culture where they were taught that their duty was to submit themselves sexually in this way. They lived in a vicious cycle where a boy would be raised in a passive position and upon reaching manhood would in turn become the active position for another boy. The cycle would continue on and on, neither side realising they were doing wrong. This is why the Law was given, to show people their sins, bring them to repentance and grant them freedom through the Gospel.

We need to remember that in these verses Paul is not declaring that these particular sins are any worse than other sins, or that these particular sinners are worse sinners than the rest of us. It would be wrong to assume that the Law was given to these sinners alone, or that they alone will not inherit the kingdom of God. For all have sinned and fallen short (Rom. 3:23) and only by the blood of Christ are any of us saved (Rom. 3:24-25). Within these lists Paul is simply providing a list of sins that are most prevalent in those communities (Corinth and Ephesus). This can be seen in Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 6:11 where he states that before they were washed, sanctified and justified, these **were** the sins that many of them persisted in. Unlike Philo, Paul is not declaring these sinners unworthy of redemption; instead he is attempting to redeem them. Paul is calling their attention to their sinful ways and calling them to live a new sanctified life in Jesus Christ.

We can then learn from Paul's example and implement it into the situations of today. We are to call people to account, show them the wickedness of their sins and lead them to Christ where they can receive forgiveness and obtain freedom from their sins. For "such **were** some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 6:11) All those who trapped by the slavery of sin (including the sin of homosexuality) are set free in Christ. (Rom. 6:6-7)

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