No Kingdom of God for Softies? or, What Was Paul Really Saying? 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in Context

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_Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology_ 2004; 34; 17
DOI: 10.1177/014610790403400103

The online version of this article can be found at: http://btb.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/34/1/17

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Abstract

The search for biblical texts on “homosexuals” and “homosexual activity” presents a particularly prickly problem of contextual reading and interpretation. It involves, among other things, a clash of ancient and modern sexual concepts, constructs, and frames of reference. Attempts at using allegedly relevant texts as moral guidelines today are subject to serious exegetical and hermeneutical constraints.

Abstract

Among the issues currently challenging the U.S. church across the denominations, there is none producing as much heat and as little light as the burning issue of the place and role of homosexuals in the church and its offices of leadership. In the studies commissioned by virtually every major American church body on this topic, attention is dutifully given to “what the Bible says on homosexuality,” but the conclusions vary widely, with no consensus anywhere in sight. For Joe and Mary Churchgoer a big part of the problem is an uncertainty or even an admitted ignorance concerning how to read, interpret, and possibly apply the Bible to this and other pressing problems of our time. Clarity is needed on at least four points: (1) how to analyze a biblical passage exegetically; (2) the hermeneutical principles guiding any exegetical undertaking; (3) the content of the investigated texts themselves—what they state and do not state; where uncertainties of meaning, nuance, and implication of the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic formulations are present; and (4) how and why translations vary and represent culturally-specific interpretations; how the meaning of each biblical text is controlled and limited by its complex of contexts (literary, historical, geographical, economic, social, cultural); and (4) the hermeneutical guidelines concerning the use of any biblical text to shape and inform theological and ethical decisions today.

With the “ordinary, unprofessional Bible reader” in view, I shall address these issues as I examine a New Testament text, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, frequently mentioned as a biblical passage relevant to the topic of “what the Bible says on homosexuality.” In reading and interpreting this text in the light of its various contexts (literary, historical, social, cultural-religious), I intend to show how one proceeds exegetically, what hermeneutical principles come into play, and how one assesses the hermeneutical relevance of this biblical text to current discussion concerning gays, lesbians, and transgender persons, “heterosexual” and “homosexual” orientation, and operative moral guidelines. This essay has undergone several transmogrifications over the years to fit specific themes of specific conferences. The current version, with minor modifications, is appearing in a 2004 publication honoring my friend and colleague, Herman C. Waetjen of San Francisco Theological Seminary, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, with the title, Hunting for Homosexuals at Corinth: Exegetical Tracking Rules and Hermeneutical Caveats. An initial draft of the paper was commissioned by and presented to a Task Force of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on Human Sexuality on 4/5/1991. The final report of this Task Force was published in November 1991 under the title, Human Sexuality and the Christian Faith: A Study for the Church’s Reflection and Deliberation.

The Text of 1 Corinthians 6:9–10: Preliminary Considerations

The passage in question reads as follows:

9 Do you not know that unjust persons will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters,
nor adulterers, nor malakoi, nor arsenokoitai.

10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.

The terms thought to bear specifically on the issue of homosexuality are malakoi and arsenokoitai.

The first problem for most Bible readers will be their inability to read the Greek text. So they shall have to resort to a translation and this introduces problems of its own. Every translation is an interpretation. This is the case because all languages encode information from their respective social and cultural systems and no two social or cultural systems are identical. They are alike in some respects but never completely identical. Thus translations always run the risk of using culture-specific or modern terms and concepts (so that the reader can understand), but terms and concepts that are alien to the cultures of the texts being translated. Our 1 Corinthians text is a classic case of this translation and interpretive problem. When "homosexuals" or "homosexual perverts" is used to translate malakoi oude arsenokoitai (as is the case in both the RSV and the TEV, for example), a modern, post-Enlightenment term coined late in the 19th century—"homosexual"—is used to translate one or two Greek terms that literally mean "soft males" and "males who lie with males." This represents a serious problem, however, since "homosexual" and "homosexuality" are conceptual constructs of recent time and have no ancient counterparts in any ancient language. The term "homosexual" was first coined by the Austrian-Hungarian Károly Mária Kerényi (Benkert) in 1869 (two pamphlets in German). It was then introduced into English in the 1890s by Charles Gilbert Chaddock in his translation of R. Krafft-Ebbing's PSYCHOPATHIA SEXUALIS (2nd edition of the German original of 1887). Thereafter it was included in the Oxford English Dictionary (1892). The word was invented to designate persons who manifested a particular sexual profile reflecting a particular modern construct of gender and sexual differentiation quite divergent from the prevailing gender construct(s) of the ancient world.

Other biblical versions prefer different translations such as Weichlinge, Knabenschänder, caitanites, sodomites, invertidos, efeminados, effeminate. Each of these expressions, of course, also is culturally laden. The startling differences among translations indicate serious problems concerning the sense of the original terms and make one wonder which, if any of them, comes closest to the meaning and implications of the original Greek terms. More on the translation problem anon. For the moment these observations should suffice for demonstrating that even the claim that this text has bearing on the topic of "homosexuality" is open to serious question. This illustrates an important, yet regularly overlooked, hermeneutical point: relevancy of certain biblical texts to certain theological or moral issues is often in the eye of the beholder. We frequently see what we have been taught to see or what we wish to see—and not always what is actually there. The "sin" is often in the eye of the beholder. Thus an accurate reading of the Bible never starts with a translation but with the original text—a step impossible for the majority of Bible readers. From the very get-go, they are thus quite dependent on the opinion of "experts,"—translators, commentators and decoders, who themselves, in the case of 1 Cor 6:9, have reached no agreement on the translation or meaning of the terms thought to be relevant to the topic of homosexuality.

Usage of these Greek terms in their linguistic context is essential to consider here. But before doing this, it will be helpful for us to first examine the literary and rhetorical context of which 1 Cor 6:9-11 is a part. Limitations of space require brevity on this matter. Here are some points that have a substantive bearing on the meaning and thrust of 6:9-11.

The Situation at Corinth and Paul's Response in General

The letter of 1 Corinthians was written by Paul about the year 55 CE or so to a small community of Jesus followers that Paul had helped establish in the seaport city of Corinth a few years earlier. In this letter Paul answers a series of questions (7:1-16:12) contained in a letter the Corinthians had sent him, and mounts a powerful critique of, and evangelical response to, a bevy of competing factions, economic divisions, and socio-cultural discriminations that were tearing apart the community. Recent adherents to the faith coming from a diversity of social, economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds had different "takes" on the gist of Paul's gospel and its social and ethical implications. Self-designated "spirituals" were claiming superiority over the "physicals"; the wealthy and powerful were disdainning the poor and powerless; the wise demeaned the foolish; the "strong" claimed superiority over the "weak"; the party of one leader opposed parties claiming allegiance to other leaders. Confusion reigned regarding the nature of salvation—was it salvation of the body or liberation from the body? Devaluations of materiality, physicality, and sexuality were asserted in the name of some "more advanced" knowledge (gnosis). Notions of freedom from communal obligations and social responsibility were thought by some (the elites in particular) to be the logical consequence of Paul's gospel of freedom. This confusion and strife was accompanied by a plethora of moral problems (around issues of sexual conduct, litigation against fellow believers, the eating of food dedicated to idols, behavior at worship) that had surfaced in this fledgling community. These problems threatening to destroy the struggling beachhead of the messianic sect at Corinth evoked from the apostle Paul one of the most sustained and powerful assertions of the unity of believers in Christ to be found in all the New Testament.
The problems addressed in chapter six form part of a discussion of immoral behavior (porneia) extending from 5:1 to 6:20. The theme of porneia, in fact, runs through this section from start to close. Of the 13 occurrences of this family of terms in 1 Corinthians, all but two (7:2; 10:8) are located in chapters 5–6 (porneia: 5:1; 6:13; 6:18; ["flee porneia;" cf. 10:14, "flee idolatry"]; 7:2; porneía: 6:18; 10:8 [2x; allusion to Num 21:5–6; cf. 10:14]; porné: 6:15, 16; pornos: 5:9, 10, 11; 6:9). The meaning of these terms can vary from a vague form of "sexual immorality" (whose specific nature is unstated) to "idolatrous engagement in polytheistic cult" to "unlawful sexual intercourse" of persons not married to "selling use of one's body for compensation," with context always determining specific meaning. Israelites and followers of Jesus conventionally associated porneia with outsider Gentiles and their forms of polytheistic worship, so that porneia could always be a term for "idolatry." This association is evident in 1 Corinthians in the juxtaposition of terms in 5:9 (pornoi, cérkóloskélatai) and 6:11 (pornoi, cérkóloskélatoi), and in the linking of worshiping idols (10:7, 14) with "indulging in immorality" (10:8). The related nouns pornos and porneí, used in a literal sense, could designate a male or a female "prostitute," respectively; and porneía, "prostitution." LSJ list catamite as the first meaning for pornos and sodomite as the second. For the LXX and NT they propose the rendition "fornicator." This is one of LSJ's less felicitous entries. Or the terms could denote "fornicator" and "fornication," or, more generally and less sexually specific, "immoral person" and "immorality." They too, however, appear in biblical contexts treating idolatry and apostasy, and, used figuratively, could denote foreign governments hostile to God and God's people (e.g. Isa 1:21; Jer 3:3; Ezk 16:30–31, 35; Rev 17:5), or persons practicing idolatry and "whoring after foreign gods" (e.g. Hos 6:10; Jer 3:29; 2 Kgdml 9:22; Rev 19:2). The kindred verb pornéō could mean either, literally, "to practice prostitution" (e.g. 1 Cor 6:18) or, figuratively, "to practice idolatry" (e.g. Hos 9:1; Jer 3:6; Ezk 23:19; Rev 17:2; 18:3, 9), with the sexual aspects of pagan cults making possible this equation of idolatry and fornication. Thus, porneia and related terms in the Bible could denote either actual or metaphorical prostitution, "peddling one's body" literally or figuratively. In the latter case, the terms could denote idolatrous and immoral behavior typical of Gentiles, including, but not restricted to, sexual behavior proscribed in Torah or viewed as incompatible with God's will.

In chapters 5 and 6 of 1 Corinthians, Paul introduces and addresses specific instances of immoral behavior (porneia, etc.) occurring in the Corinthian community of believers: a case of incest (5:1, 9), activity as prostitutes (6:13, 6:16, 18), commerce with prostitutes (6:16, 18), and a related case of inappropriate interaction with unjust/unrighteous unbelievers (6:1–8) which, as its context suggests, Paul also regards as an instance of porneia. The verses attached to 6:1–8, namely vv 9–11, continue on the theme of porneia as they include pornoi and cérkóloskélatai (v 9) in a list of persons excluded from the kingdom of God. Chapter seven introduces a new topic, marriage (7:1–40). The porneia of which Paul speaks (7:2) here appears not to be selling oneself as a prostitute and engaging in idolatry but rather sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

Chapter five opens with mention of a case of incest (5:1), a type of porneia condemned even by Gentiles, Paul notes. Thus the pornoi referred to a bit later (5:9, 10) could be understood as perpetrators of incest. On the other hand, since they appear here in 5:9 and 5:10, as in 6:9–10, in traditional lists of various types of immoral persons, the term pornoi might have the more general sense of "sexually immoral persons" or "fornicators." In any case, Paul's chief concern in 5:1–12 was to denounce this act of incest within the Corinthian community because it undermined the moral and social integrity of the believing community as a whole. The believers are urged to "remove him from among you" (5:2) and to "purge the evil one from your midst" (5:13). The OT prohibition of incest appears in Deuteronomy 22:23 (HT: 23:1; cf. 27:20; Lev 18:20; 20:11). But the excommunicating injunction, "purge the evil one from your midst," was employed repeatedly in Deuteronomic legislation in relation not only to incest but to a variety of community-threatening acts (13:6, 17:7, 19:19, 22:24; 24:7).

Thus, in regard to 1 Corinthians 5:1–11 and the case of incest within the community, this instance of porneia was seen by Paul as something that could contaminate the entire community (as leaven "contaminates" a lump of dough). From this perspective, therefore, the perpetrator had to be expelled (5:2, 13) and delivered to Satan with the goal of freeing the community of this contaminating "malice and evil" (5:8) and of seeking his ultimate repentance and salvation (5:5). Ethically, Paul's strategy for dealing with this situation assumes (1) a group of believing insiders demarcated from immoral outsiders (5:12); (2) an infecting and polluting power of porneia capable of corrupting the entire community (as leaven does a lump of dough); (3) the cultural (Israelite) association of leaven with malice and evil (5:8) and the Christian identification of Jesus Christ as paschal lamb (associated with unleavened bread, 5:7); and (4) the effectiveness of social excommunication as a controlling discipline for maintaining ideological and social cohesion. These assumptions regarding the necessary demarcation of believing, holy insiders from unbelieving, unholy outsiders and concerning the infectious and contaminating power of immorality and unholiness inform all of 5:1–6:20 and its ethical strategy and in fact the letter as a whole.

The exhortation of chapter 6 is related thematically to that of chapter 5 and was likewise guided by these assumptions. What relates the issues of litigation (6:1–8), conduct barring admission to the kingdom of God (6:9–11), and intercourse...
with prostitutes (6:12–20) to the preceding case of incest is a similar social problem and a similar Pauline response inspired by a similar set of assumptions: (1) the unacceptable association of holy insiders (6:1, 11, 19) with “unjust/unrighteous” outsiders (6:1), including prostitutes (6:16), and the illogical submission of the holy ones to inferior outsiders’ legal judgment (6:1–8); (2) discord within the community (6:1–8) and the pollution affecting the entire Body of Christ through members’ association with prostitutes (6:15–20; cf. 6:11); and (3) a libertine (6:12, 13) and arrogant (cf. 5:2, 6) attitude of certain Corinthians that “all things are lawful” (6:12; cf. also 10:23 in regard to eating idol meat and brotherly scandal), a slogan apparently implying that for the believers there are no moral norms or principles or sanctions now governing moral conduct and no reasons for distinguishing members of the Christ community from others.

In response, Paul insisted on five basic points. (1) Since believers have been “washed, sanctified and justified” (6:11b), they are a new and holy people (6:1, 11), different from the way they were prior to their baptism and inclusion into the believing community (6:11a). (2) As members of a holy community, they are superior to unjust/unrighteous outsiders (adikoi, 6:1, 2–4) and therefore should avoid subjecting themselves to the outsiders in their courts of law (6:1, 4, 6). (3) They should rather settle disputes among themselves (6:2, 5), and preferably eliminate these legal disputes among believers altogether (6:7–8). (4) There are indeed moral principles and standards operative for believers. Believers are called to a morality superior to that of unjust/unrighteous (adikoi, 6:1, 9) outsiders, who will not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9). Ten examples of such unjust/unrighteous persons are mentioned (6:9–10); some of the Corinthians were among such persons prior to their baptismal washing, their being made holy, and their being made just/righteous (6:11). (5) All things are indeed lawful, but not all things are advantageous for the good of the whole community (6:12; 10:23, 33; 12:7); that is, for the building up of the Body of Christ. This is a fundamental ethical principle that is reiterated throughout the letter (cf. 8:1–13; 10:23–11:1; chapters 12–14) and that is meant to guide conduct aimed at overcoming the basic problem of dissension and division within the community.

The issue of communal dissension and disunity is raised at the very outset of the letter (1:10), and throughout the letter Paul takes up and responds to various types of its manifestation: competing factions, envy, and strife (1:10–17; 3:1–23); conflicting, boastful claims to knowledge and wisdom (2:1–16; 3:18–23; 4:6–21) concerning sexual matters (chapters 5–7); eating meat devoted to idols (8:1–13; 10:1–11:1); eucharistic celebration and worship (11:1–14:40); and the Christian understanding of death and resurrection (1:18–25; 15:1–58). In general, Paul aims at enabling the factious Corinthians to see themselves as the one communal entity, one integral Body of Christ (6:15, 19; 10:16–17; 11:27; 12:1–13:13) and to behave accordingly. Thus the aim of the believers as constituents of this new collective reality, the “Body of Christ,” should be to live not as independent individuals (“just me and Jesus”), but as persons incorporated into the crucified and resurrected body of Jesus Christ (6:15, 17; 12:12–13), to strengthen and build up this collective body (8:1; 10:23), to maintain undivided devotion to the Lord (7:35), and with this collective body to glorify God (6:20).

Membership in (1) the ecclesial Body of Christ, in other words, has specific ethical implications regarding the consumption of (2) the eucharistic body of Christ and the use of (3) one’s physical body now united with the Body of Christ.

This examination of the wider and more immediate literary and rhetorical contexts of 6:9–10 has surfaced several items that bear on the meaning of these verses, their specific terms, and the thrust of Paul’s thinking and exhortation.

1. The letter as a whole (a) addresses problems of congregational disparities, disension, discrimination, and division, (b) argues that the attitudes and conduct responsible for these problems are incompatible with membership in the collective Body of the crucified and resurrected Christ, and (c) calls for behavior aimed at demonstrating and maintaining communal cohesion and ideological commitment to God, Jesus Christ, and one another. In regard to 6:9–10, this means that whatever the sense of these verses might be, it must be consistent with this integrating and unifying aim of the letter as a whole.

2. In regard to 5:1–6:20, the more immediate context of 6:9–10, the chief concern of this section is with types of porneia that are damaging the ethical integrity and communal cohesion of the group and that are incompatible with membership in the Body of Christ. With respect to 6:9–10, this means that the behavior that Paul condemns in vv 9–10 is proscribed because, from Paul’s perspective, it is linked with porneia and is typical of outsider Gentile behavior, and because it pollutes and contaminates the holy community of believers and violates the integrity of the Body of Christ.

3. In his treatment of the issue of believers litigating with fellow believers in the courts of law of nonbelieving outsiders (6:1–11), Paul objects that the holy believers (RSV: “saints,” 6:1) are inappropriately submitting themselves to the judgment of the unjust/unrighteous (adikoi) unbelieving (6:1, 6) outsiders. In reality, however, it is God’s holy ones (i. e., we ourselves who have been made holy in baptism, 6:11) who will judge the world (6:2) and angels (6:3), and thus “how much more concerning matters of this life!” (6:3). Believers, in fact, should not be litigating at all with one another, and should rather suffer injustice (adikosthēte). But instead, they unjustly treat (adikēte) and defraud one another (6:7–8). The issue of this passage thus is that believers should not behave unjustly with one another and should not submit their disputes to the
judgment of unbelieving outsiders who are unsanctified, unjust, and morally inferior.

4. Continuing on the issue of justice-injustice as well as on the theme of porneia, Paul then in vv 9–11 reminds his audience that “unjust/unrighteous persons” (like those of whom he has been speaking, 6:1) will not inherit the kingdom of God (v 9a). To illustrate further examples of unjust/unrighteous persons not inheriting the kingdom of God, he lists ten types of such unjust persons (vv 9b–10) and comments that some of the Corinthians were in fact such persons prior to their baptism and conversion. However, through baptism they have been “washed, sanctified, and justified”—implying their inclusion in the holy Body of Christ (6:14, 17, 19–20). The ethical implication is that baptism and incorporation in the holy body of Christ entails a severance from unjust/unrighteous persons and non-engagement in the conduct typical of such persons.

The hermeneutical importance of this last observation is that the list, of which the terms crucial to our subject are a part, is cited to exemplify types of unjust/unrighteous persons who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (6:9, 10). Whatever the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai might mean, their function in this letter is the same as that of the other terms of the list: to exemplify unjust/unrighteous persons—persons different from the holy believers and outside the kingdom of God. Peter Zaas (1988) correctly stressed the close relation of the lists to the situation of the letter and discussed their rhetorical function.

Homosexuals at Corinth?

Within this general and more immediate context of the letter occurs a list of persons (1 Cor 6:9b–10) that contains two terms at the heart of our investigation, terms that have often been cited as evidence that the Bible condemns homosexuals and homosexual behavior. The words so understood are malakoi and arsenokoitai. They are quite rare and their meanings, very problematic. Several observations are in order here.

First, the terms (both masculine) are part of a larger list of persons declared to be excluded from the kingdom of God (6:9b–10). This list, in turn, is similar to, and expands upon, two previous lists of immoral persons presented in chapter 5. A comparison of the lists indicates that they are similar in some respects and different in others.

The shortest of the three is that of 5:10. It mentions four types of “immoral” persons inhabiting human society outside the believing community: pornois, (“immoral persons”? “prostitutes”? clients of a prostitute? perpetrators of incest?), greedy persons (pleonektai), robbers (harpanoi), and idolaters (eidololatrai). This list, says Paul, illustrates types of immoral outsiders of whom he was not speaking in his earlier letter (5:9a, 11a) when he encouraged the Corinthians “not to associate with immoral persons (pornois)” (5:9). Avoidance of such persons out there in society, he said, would have been impossible from a practical point of view (5:10b). Furthermore, judging outsiders is not the task of believers but rather the job of God (5:12–13a).

In that earlier letter (described in 5:11) he in fact discouraged association and dining with certain types of fellow believers; namely a “brother” who was either a pornos, a greedy person (pleonektai), an idolater (eidololatrai), a reviler (laidoros), a drunkard/boozar (mechyses), or a robber (harpa). It is believers within the community whose conduct was and is Paul’s concern (5:12a), and he now commands the Corinthians to “drive out,” excommunicate, the evil person (paneron; cf. “evil,” 5:8) from their midst (5:13b), that is, the male committing the porneia of incest mentioned in 5:1–8 and already targeted for exclusion (5:2, 5, 7–8). Thus the “immoral persons” mentioned in 5:10 were nonbelieving outsiders, not believing insiders. The list of 5:11, on the other hand, concerns immoral types of fellow believers. Nevertheless, the lists mention the same types of immoral persons, except that the longer list of 5:11 adds “reviler and drunkard.”

The list in 6:9–10 is longest of the three. It includes all the types listed in 5:10 and all those of 5:11, and it adds four further terms: “adulterers” (maichoi), malakoi, arsenokoitai, and “thieves” (kleptai), inserting them as a block of four between “idolaters” and “greedy persons.”

Table 1 displays the similarities and differences of the three lists. Terms of 5:11 added to those of 5:10, and terms of 6:9–10 added to those of 5:10 and 5:11 are italicized.

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Table 1: The Three Lists of Vices

The size of the lists and the sequence of terms thus vary. Moreover, 1 Corinthians 5:11 lists singular terms, in contrast to the plural terms of 5:10 and 6:9–10. 1 Corinthians 5:11 enumerates types of immoral believer insiders, whereas 1 Corinthians 5:10 and 6:9–10 list types of immoral outsiders. All three lists commence with the term porneia/pornos, which links all these lists to the general theme of porneia/immorality and to Paul’s earlier injunction not to associate with pornois (5:9). As
already noted, the semantic range of pornos is broad and its meaning here far from certain. It could denote immoral persons, or male prostitutes, or clients of a prostitute, or perpetrators of incest, any one of which meanings would have ties to the context. "Immoral persons" would be consistent with 5:1, 9 and the immoral litigaters of 6:1–8. "Male prostitutes" or "clients of a prostitute" would be consistent with 6:15–18. "Perpetrators of incest" would fit the content of 5:1. The increasing size of the lists could suggest Paul's moving toward a climactic and inclusive conclusion in chapter 6, where the most comprehensive list is given as illustrative of behavior excluding persons from the kingdom of God. The longest list, 6:9–10, is either the source from which the terms of 5:10 and 11 are excerpts (so Scruggs) or a Pauline expansion of the previous lists through the intention- 
al addition of the terms adulterers, malakoi, arsenokoitai, and thieves (so Zaa). The first three of these terms would be germane to a sexual implication of porneia in 5:1–6:20, but not the fourth. On the whole, the lists involve vices stereotypically associated by the Israelites with Gentile outsiders and proscribed within the House of Israel and the Jesus movement. Here their function appears primarily illustrative and, except for pornos/pornoi, involves activities not at the heart of Paul's concern.

The contents of the lists refer to types of persons or actions conventionally proscribed in Greco-Roman culture (e.g. greedy, robbers, revilers) or Israelite culture (all terms). Similar "vice lists" appear in Galatians 5:19–21 and Ephesians 5:5 with the statement that such persons will not inherit the "kingdom of God," an expression rarely employed by Paul. Of the four instances in his authentic letters (Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6: 9, 10; 15:50), half appear here and in three cases the phrase accompanies vice lists (here in 6:9 and 10 and in Galatians 5:21). Such lists or catalogues of vices were a typical component of Israelite moral exhortation (see Wis.14:25–27; Sir 7:1–21; 1 Enoch 8:1–4; 2 Enoch 10:4–6; 34:1–2; 2 Bar. 73:4; 1QS 4,9–11; 10:21–23; T. Reub. 3:3–6; T. Dan 1:6; T. Sim. 3:1; T. Dan 2:4; T. Jud. 16:1; Philo, SAC. 32 [147 vices!]; Jos. Ag. Ap. 2,19–28; T. Mos. 7:3–10). They were adopted and used by members of the Christ movement as well (see Matt 15:19/Mark 7:21–22; Rom 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor 12:20–21; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 4:25–31; 5:3–13; Col 3:5–9; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 6:4–5; 2 Tim 3:2–5; Tit 3:3; 9; Rev 21:8; 22:15; cf. also Did. 2–5; 5:1–2; HERM. MAND. 8.3; SIM 6.5.5; 9.15.3; Polyc. PHIL. 4:3; 5:2, 3; 6:1).

The lists of 1 Cor 5:10, 5:11 and 6:9–10 appear to have belonged to this stock of ethical and hortatory tradition, of which Paul and many other Christian authors made use. The facts that language concerning "not inheriting the kingdom of God" also accompanied some of these lists and that the phrase was rarely employed by Paul (except where he cites lists), make its virtually certain that these vice lists in 1 Corinthians were not composed by Paul, but were adopted and adapted by him from existing tradition. This likelihood is strengthened by the fact that in this letter Paul frequently uses the expression "do you not know" (1 Cor 6:9a) to introduce and recall sources or points of knowledge with which he expected his audience to be familiar (see 1 Cor 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:13, 24; cf. also Rom 6:16; 11:2). It is also evident, moreover, that the formulation of the source, "will not inherit the kingdom of God"—so unusual for Paul—inspired Paul's own statement, "do you not know that unjust/unrighteous persons will not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul worded his own statement (6:9a) to fit the language of the source he was about to cite (6:9b–10).

The function of the list of 6:9b–10 was to provide examples of the "unjust/unrighteous persons" mentioned in 6:1 and 6:9a (so also Zaa: 626–27). They are like, or even comprise, non-believing outsiders to whom the Corinthian believers should not be taking their internal disputes (6:1–8). Only one of the terms of the list, however, is directly linked to the chief theme of 5:1–6:20, porneia, and that is the first term mentioned, namely pornos. Thus it is clear that this list and those of chapter five are not at the heart of Paul's argument, but rather enumerate stock vices used to illustrate types of behavior inconsistent with membership in the Body of Christ and with having been "washed, sanctified, and justified." (6:11).

There are several exegetical implications of these observations concerning 6:9–11 for our analysis of the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai. (1) Vv 9–11 are a continuation and conclusion of a Pauline condemnation of litigation against fellow believers in the courts of law of "outsiders" (6:1–8). (2) The list in vv 9–10, like those of 5:10 and 5:11, was not composed by Paul but taken over by him from available hortatory tradition. (3) The list in vv 9–10, like those of 5:10 and 5:11, has only an illustrative function and is peripheral to the heart of Paul's exhortation. The lists could all be excluded with no damage to Paul's argument. They are supplemental, not essential. (3) In the list, pornos is the only term related to the chief theme of 5:1–6:20, namely porneia and its avoidance. None of the other terms, including malakoi and arsenokoitai, is connected with Paul's argument or essential to points he is making in 5:1–6:20. (Beyond this context, "idolaters" [6:9; cf. 5:10, 11] is related to the issue of idolatry taken up in 8:1–11:1.) (4) The terms malakoi and arsenokoitai occur only here in 1 Corinthians and are not a specific focus of Paul's attention. (5) At this point in our study, it is not certain what their meaning is, why they are present in this list, or what role they have in the point Paul is making. One thing, however, is clear: whatever weight and moral significance these two terms have, must be shared by all the terms in the list. Or, to put it another way, being malakoi or arsenokoitai is no better or worse than being any other kind of person included in the list. Types of immoral or unjust people are
listed here, but not graded. No vice, including malakoi and arsenokoitai, receives particular comment or censure.

The terms malakoi and arsenokoitai occur nowhere else in 1 Corinthians and are unique to 1 Corinthians among the genuine Pauline letters. The latter term, arsenokoitai, appears in the Deutero-Pauline letter of 1 Timothy (1:9–10), never again in the NT, and only rarely thereafter. The former term, malakoi, appears only twice more in the NT (Matt 11:8/Luke 7:25) and thereafter, combined again with arsenokoitai, in a quotation of 1 Corinthians 6:9 contained in Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians (5:3). Given the rarity of this lexical combination in the Greek world generally, the lack of Pauline and biblical contexts for determining what Paul might have meant by the terms in 1 Corinthians is especially problematic. Thus it is hardly surprising that there is at present no scholarly consensus concerning their meaning and significance in 1 Corinthians or concerning their relevance to the issue of homosexuality.

There is as much disagreement among Bible translations as there is among commentators. The comparison of Bible translations in Table 2 illustrates the diversity or confusion concerning the assumed meaning of these terms and how that meaning is best rendered in modern languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulgate:</th>
<th>neque molles neque masculorum concubitores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luther:</td>
<td>noch die Weichlinge noch die Knabenschänder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zürcher:</td>
<td>noch Lusthaben noch Knabenschänder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV:</td>
<td>nor effeminates nor abusers of themselves with mankind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodspeed 1923</td>
<td>or sensual or given to unnatural vice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moffatt 1926</td>
<td>catamites, sodomites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible de Jerusalem 1961</td>
<td>ni dépravés, ni gens de moeurs infames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem Bible 1956</td>
<td>catamites, sodomites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New JB 1985</td>
<td>self-indulgent, sodomites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knox New Testament</td>
<td>the effeminates, the sinners against nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Biblia 1990</td>
<td>ni los afeinados, ni los homosexuales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Sacra Bibbia 1984</td>
<td>né gli effeminati, né i sodomiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAB 1990</td>
<td>nor boy prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEB 1970</td>
<td>guilty of ... homosexual perversion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nueva Biblia Espanola:</td>
<td>incertidos, sodomitas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV 1946</td>
<td>nor homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV 1971</td>
<td>nor sexual perverts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New RSV 1989</td>
<td>male prostitutes, sodomites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised English Bible</td>
<td>sexual pervert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEV 1976</td>
<td>or homosexual perverts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weymouth NT</td>
<td>nor men guilty of unnatural crime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: A Comparison of Bible Translations

Another hermeneutical note: the number of different translating terms and the semantic differences among these terms is both remarkable and depressing. With ordinary Bible readers encountering such different versions of the biblical text in one language alone, to say nothing of differences across cultures, what hope is there that religious bodies appealing to this Corinthian text could ever reach agreement on what it originally meant and what meaning it might continue to have today? John Boswell (1980: 338–39), summarizing only some English versions of this text, put it mildly when he stated that this translational variation “inspires skepticism, and close examination suggests that no modern translations of these terms are very accurate.” I would add that the above comparison also makes vividly clear the tendency of modern translations to ascribe meanings to these terms that reflect modern conceptions of persons labeled “homosexual,” their behavior and moral evaluation, that may have little or nothing to do with the meaning of the Greek terms in their original cultural context. In other words, this passage, to which hunters for homosexuals in the Bible have attributed so much significance, offers a classic case of eisegesis displacing sound exegesis, inadvertently reading into the text what supposedly is to be elicited from a text. The translations tell us as much, if not more, about the culture and values of the translators than they do about the culture and values of Paul and his sources.

Perhaps we as readers or translators or interpreters can never entirely avoid this danger of ethnocentrism any more than we can change the ocular lenses with which we view all so-called “reality.” As modern readers of ancient and culturally alien texts, none of us possesses “immaculate perception.” But surely we can make an effort at some modest degree of objectivity. One step in this direction is to ask, like a field anthropologist would ask of a native tribe she or he was studying, what do the natives mean by these words? With what values and perceptions, attitudes and even worldviews are these terms connected? What did these terms possibly mean in their original historical, social and cultural context? Let us first consider malakoi, then arsenokoitai.

**Malakoi**

The Greek adjective malakos literally means “soft.” The term malakoi, a masculine plural form used here as a substantive, means, literally, “soft males.” In its only other NT occurrence, the Q logion of Matthew 11:8/Luke 7:25, it appears twice as a substantive neuter plural, malaka (literally, “soft things”), which in context denotes “soft clothing.” Addressing the Galilean crowds about John the Baptist, Jesus asked, “Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing live in kings’ houses.” The ironic point of this rhetorical question is clear only from the narrative and the cultural context. John, the hearers/readers had already learned in Matthew 3:1–10, was a wildman prophet
like those of old, preaching in the desolate wilderness of Judaea, clothed with a coarse and definitely unrefined leather girdle and chowing down on locusts and wild honey while denouncing the holy Pharisees and the priestly elite as "snake bastards." (The parallel Lukan account [7:18–35] combines in one unit what Matthew narrates in two separate accounts [3:1–10; 11:7–19]). John was anything but an aristocratic wealthy peer given to the luxuries and refinements of life! In this only other occurrence of malakos in the NT, the word indicates an item of apparel illustrating the economic-social-cultural distinction between robust moral people like Jesus and his predecessor John, on the one hand, and rich elite "softies," on the other. In first-century Palestine, real men didn't eat quiche and didn't wear soft clothes! Honest, reliable, salt-of-the-earth people (from the 97% lower class) have no connection with kings' houses, expensive threads, and the soft life (enjoyed by only 3% or less of the population, its "upper crust"). Could the term malakos have such class implications here in 1 Corinthians? If the hermeneutical principle often appealed to in the hunt for homosexuals in the Bible were brought into play—"let scripture interpret scripture"—a case could be made that "soft males" here in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 implies decadent "rich men" who are always ripping off poor folk (like the Enron swindlers or Charles Keating or Neil Bush or Michael Milken or Dennis Kozlowski or Kenny Boy Lay or . . . I could for lack of space and spirit). Paul's cultural context allows this as a possibility, since in a world where all goods were seen as in scarce and limited supply, rich people were always viewed suspiciously as rapacious thieves expanding their wealth and profiting at the expense of others (Malina 1979, 1986, 2001: 81–133). Such a meaning, moreover, would be consistent with several of the other terms in the list: e. g., "thieves, greedy persons, robbers." On the other hand, "soft males" could also possibly refer to males with soft physical features, soft skin, hair, or cheeks, or soft and gentle in their nature. Or might it imply males who were "soft-headed" or "weak-willed" persons, "lacking in self-control" (LS, s.v.). Or could it mean "ill males," given the fact that its noun, malakia, denoted "sickness, debility, weakness" (BDAG 613). Without extensive knowledge of the cultural context, how could one decide which of these alternatives is more plausible for a first-century audience at Corinth? And yet how often some rush to claim that the term means "homosexuals" without further exegetical ado? One thing is absolutely certain: the word was no technical, conventional term for males who engaged in sex with other males. It had no sexual connotation in Matthew and Luke and if it did so in 1 Corinthians 6:9, this must be demonstrated on other linguistic grounds.

Here is where ancient views of males and females, their differing natures and modes of behavior—that is, ancient constructs of gender—become relevant (among other studies see Waetjen). Ancient Mediterraneans viewed human beings as either male or female, each with nature-given, distinctive, gender-based personal features, social ranking and behavioral scripts. The ideal male was seen as rational, physically strong, daring, bold, courageous, competitive, socially and sexually aggressive, rough and tough, hard and hairy, protector of his home and family and embodiment of the family's honor (its public reputation and status) symbolized in his blood, male organ, and testicles. The ideal female was his physical, mental, and moral opposite. She was emotional more than rational, physically weak, reticent, modest, sensitive, socially and sexually vulnerable, smooth and gentle, soft and depilated, nurturer of her home and family and embodiment of her family's shame (the vulnerability of its honor) symbolized in her blood, breasts and vulva. Since the world of the Bible was a patriarchal world whose dominant ideas, values, and worldviews were those of the dominant free males, the male was regarded—males regarded themselves—as superior "by nature" and the female, inferior, just as the traits ascribed to the male were judged superior to those ascribed to the female. He was dominant and ruled; she was subordinate and was ruled. He was on top, she was on the bottom (in bed and everywhere else). He was active; she was passive. He gave; she received. His organ was a plow; hers was a field. He was the "sower"; she was the "soil." For ancient sources and secondary literature on this ancient construct of male and female genders see Delaney; Halperin: 15–40, 41–53; Halperin et. al.; Malina 1990; Dean-Jones; Malina & Neyrey; Winkler; Williams; Elliott: 500–99; Malina 2001: 27–57.

Given this notion of the inferiority of females, male to male friendships were preferred to male to female relationships. Achilles Tatius, in his story LEUCIPPE AND CLITOPHON, has one of his characters articulate a prevalent view concerning the preference for boys over women:

To me you sound less like a beginner in sex than an old pro, surrounding us with all these female complications. Now listen to what I have to say in defense of boys. Everything women do is false, both words and actions. Even if a woman appears to be beautiful, it is the laborious contrivance of make-up. Her beauty is all perfume, or hair dye, or potions. And if you strip her of all these devices, she'll look like the jackdaw in the fable, stripped of all his feathers. A boy's beauty isn't fostered by the scent of myrrh or by other false odors; a boy's sweat smells sweeter than all women's perfumes . . .

Accordingly, in this macho-oriented culture, for a male to appear in any way whatsoever as "womanish" was a horror and an immediate occasion for public censure and ridicule. For him to display any feature associated with females was to deny his identity and responsibility as a male, a distortion of how nature
and the gods intended him to be. The same script applied to females in reverse: any display on their part of "masculine" traits was a violation of their feminine identity as established by nature and the gods, and constituted conduct earning public censure and reproach. According to this cultural script, then, for males to be called "soft" (a quality of females) could have constituted a potent public put-down, similar to certain males today being called "passies" or "cunts" or "bitches." For females to prefer being soft and adopting other "feminine" characteristics was disgraceful, repugnant, and a bid for public condemnation. In other words, for males to be "effeminate" was a gross violation of moral norms and expectations concerning honorable male conduct. To be sure, this does not mean that such boundary-crossing behavior never happened. Rather when it did, it was open to damaging public ridicule and a debilitating loss of honor, reputation, and status. For the ancients it was a short step from "effeminate" male youth ("fairies," "fruits," "sissies" they would be called today) parading around like women to the assumption that these "faggots" or "queens" assumed the passive, receptive role of women in sexual intercourse with older men and became their "bitches," as our contemporary jargon puts it.

It is crucial here to recognize the fact that sex, as understood by the ancient Greeks (that is, the dominant males), centered on the male sexual equipment, the erect penis or phallos, and phallic penetration of a receptive partner (Halperin: 130). Sex, in other words, was phallicly conceived, defined, and artistically depicted. To be "masculine" was to possess and wield a phallos, to be aggressive, to dominate, to be "on top" physically and socially. To be "feminine" was to lack a penis, to be passive, submissive, penetrated, and physically and socially "below" the male. This explains the relative lack of male interest in what females did with one another (unless surrogate phallices [aka dildoes] were involved). Halperin notes (136) that Plato is "the only writer of the classical period to speak about sexual desire between women" (SYMPOSIUM 191E 2–5). It also explains a major vantage point from which male character and behavior was viewed and evaluated.

In the numerous ancient references to male-male sexual relations, where censure was expressed, it focused chiefly on the disgrace of young males abandoning or at least compromising their masculinity and assuming the position and role of inferior, passive, and receptive females (Dover: 100–09).

Israelites shared this perspective. For example, Philo, an Israelite contemporary of Paul, commenting on the ancient residents of Sodom, dwelled on the horror of emasculation:

Men mounted males without respect for the sexual nature [physin] which the active partner shares with the passive. And so when they tried to beget children they were discovered to be incapable of any but a sterile seed... Then as little by little they accustomed those who were by nature men [who had been born male] to submit to play the part of women, they saddled them with the formidable curse of a female disease. For not only did they emasculate [malakōtēi] their bodies by luxury and voluptuousness, but they worked a further degeneration in their souls and, as far as in them lay, were corrupting the whole of mankind [ON ABRAHAM 135–36].

Philo's concern was less with male-male coitus per se and more with how such intercourse distorted gender roles and promoted the disgraceful effeminization of the passive male partner. Similar disgust with males "changing the order of their nature" into females and females doing likewise was registered by other Israelites. Pseudo-Phocylides (first century BCE – first century CE) writes (SENTENCES, lines 190–92): "Do not transgress with unlawful sex the limits set by nature. For even animals are not pleased by intercourse of male with male. And let women not imitate the sexual role of men." He also warns (lines 213–14): "Guard the youthful prime of life of a comely boy, because many [men] rage for intercourse with a man." The effeminate males in view were youths, not children. They were pubescent boys (paides) who had reached puberty but had not yet grown beards. At the same time, they were not adult males on the same physical, economic, or social level as their partners, but were inferior in terms of both age and social station (Halperin: 20–21). In this respect, male-male sexual relations mirrored and replicated the unequal pattern of male-female relations (Dover: 16, 84–85). Attested male-male sexual relations in antiquity were, with few exceptions, between unequal partners, with the older, socially superior male pursuing, dominating, and on occasion, "corrupting" the younger, inferior youth (Halperin: 20–21).

Philo's treatise, ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE (59–62), illustrates several of these features of male to male sexual relations as viewed by Israelites in Paul's time: the assumed inferiority of females to males; the "disease of effeminacy," male to male sexual relations as older males to youths (and the reciprocal terms of "beloved" and "lover"); the symbolizing of intercourse between males as sowing seed among rocks and stones; and his rationale for the condemnation. Describing the first of Plato's two types of banquets, Philo writes:

In Plato's banquet, the talk is almost entirely concerned with love (erōtēs), not merely with love-sickness of men for women, or women for men, passions recognized by the laws of nature, but of men for other males (andōn areisai) differing from them only in age. For, if we find some clever subtlety dealing apparently with the heavenly Love and Aphrodite, it is brought in to give a touch of humour. The chief part is taken up by the common vulgar love (erōs) which robs men of the courage which is the virtue most valuable for the life both of peace and war, sets up the disease of
effeminacy (thēleian de noson) in their souls and turns into male-female hybrids (androgyneous) those males who should have been disciplined in all the practices which make for valour. And having wrought havoc with the years of boyhood and reduced the boy to the grade and condition of a girl (erōmenēs) besieged by a lover, it inflicts damage on lovers (tous erastas) also in three most essential respects, their bodies, their souls, and their property. For the mind of the lover (tou paiderastou) is necessarily set towards his darling (ta paidika) and its sight is keen for him only, blind to all other interests, private and public; his body wastes away through desire (epithymia), particularly if his suit is unsuccessful, while his property is diminished by two causes, neglect and expenditure on his beloved (ton erōmenon). As a side growth we have another greater evil of national importance. Cities are desolated, the best kind of men become scarce, sterility (stērōsion) and childlessness (agonian) ensure through the devices of these who imitate men who have no knowledge of husbandry by sowing not in the deep soil of the lowland [i.e. coitus with the female] but in briny fields and stony and stubborn places, which not only give no possibility for anything to grow but even destroy the seed deposited within them [i.e., anal coitus with young males who cannot conceive].

The metaphor of sowing in rocks and stones was used already by Plato (Laws 838E). It presumed the widespread symbolizing of male-female intercourse as “sowing seed” (the male) in fertile soil (the female), ploughing (the male) a field (the female), in all cases of which, of course, the male is the active penetrator and the female, the passive penetrated.

In another treatise, On the Virtues, Philo explains the prohibition of Deuteronomy 23:5 (“a woman shall not wear anything pertaining to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment”) as assuring in regard to the male that “no trace, no merest shadow of the female, should attach to him to spoil his masculinity” (VIRT. 18), and that “in such matters the real man should maintain his masculinity, particularly in his clothes, which, as he always wears them by day and night, ought to have nothing to suggest unmanliness (anandria)” (VIRT. 20).

These sentiments were in keeping with the Israelite insistence that social order, like the natural order, is maintained by respecting the distinctions among things that the Creator established from the beginning. As Israel conceived the creation, trees, plants, and living beings of the water, earth, and air were created “according to their own kind” and belonged properly to the domain of either earth, water or air (Gen 1). This feature of creation required that God’s people respect the distinctions set by God, abhor all anomalies that failed to fit a specific class, and never mix those entities that God specifically separated (Lev 11; Deut 14:3–20). Behind this system of classification and regulation of life lay a fundamental concern for order in society and in the cosmos, which in Israel, was spelled out in a system distinguishing “clean” from “unclean,” “pure” from “impure,” “holy” from “profane,” as anthropologist Mary Douglas has so brilliantly shown in her classic cross-cultural studies on purity and pollution (Douglas 1966, 1970, 1975). Anomalous creatures were abominated as unclean and were forbidden for food:

I am the Lord your God, who have separated you from the people. You therefore shall make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or bird or anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be a ne [Lev: 20:24–26].

In this same spirit Torah declared that “a woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God” (Deut 22:5).

This abhorrence of mixing the not-to-be-mixed extended to animals, seed, and cloth as well. “You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall there come upon you a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material” (Lev 19:19; Deut 22:9). “You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together. You shall not wear a mingled stuff, wool and linen together” (Deut 22:10–11). The distinctiveness of male and that of female was understood as set by God in accord with the established distinctiveness of all created things. Social order required observance of these distinctions. For males or females to violate these boundaries and exchange their “God-given” and “nature-determined” roles was to violate Torah and seriously undermine the order to which Torah pointed—the argument that Paul mounted in his letter to the Romans (1:18–32).

Throughout the ancient world, for males to adopt the ways of females and “effeminize” themselves, to morph from lads into ladies, as it were, was looked upon with loathing and execrated with an entire arsenal of labels: thēlydrías, thyluprepés, ekheleúmenenos, gynyn (can also mean castratus), gynaikanór, gynaíktias; androgyneos, batalos, balekos, kínaios, kínaidologos. Latin labels included effeminare, effeminatus, effeminatio; mollis; delicatus; scortum (exoleteum, prostitubulum); cf. also kínaios and pathici (male prostitutes). Entire peoples were put down by the Greeks as effeminates/sagossos: Lydians, Persians, Medes, Phrygians, Amazons, Babylonians, Armenians, Syrians, Libyans, Carthaginians, Ionians, Athenians, Corinthians, Cypriots, Rhodians, Sybarites, Tarentines, even Romans (Or. Stb. 5.167)—often because of their “feminine” attire or because they were perceived to be under the domination of women (e.g. Amazons or Phrygians worshipping Cybele or Syrians worshipping Dea Syria; cf. also the “female” attire of
Dionysos and Priapos. For males to make themselves up as females (thēlymenothai) was to act “against nature” (Diog. Laert. 6.65; Seneca, Ep. 122.7) and an “illness” (Seneca, CONTR. 2.1), as Philo also put it. Fine, soft material (silk, muslin, etc.) was “female” attire, as were colored or purple clothing, long robes, much underclothing; fine footwear, elaborate head coverings (especially the mitre), and jewelry; showing attention to hair care; being bearded; depilation of body hair; delighting in cosmetics and perfume, and looking like a female in bodily appearance and gait (wagging of hips, inclining of head); unsteady eyes and gaze; high voice, lisping; and luxury and a soft way of life. (On effeminacy in the ancient world, see Herter 1959.) These are elements of prevailing constructs of female and male gender, utterly misinformed scientifically, yet universally held notions related to the loathing of effeminacy that fostered in the ancient macho-obsessed world and shaped its language, social relations, and behavioral scripts.

From a cultural perspective, it is quite possible that with malakoi Paul was referring to this type of “soft males.” He then would have been speaking of “effeminate males,” just as Jerome, Luther, KJV, Knox, and the Spanish and Italian versions consider to have been the case. Such effeminate males, could have included, beside depilated dandies, entertainers acting as women, transvestites (in modern parlance), eunuchs (castrated and hence emasculated = “effeminated”) or even males with long hair. According to Paul, males wearing long hair were acting contrary to their nature and were behaving as effeminate looking like women. Paul makes this point when trying to explain and justify the differences in attire between men and women (1 Cor 11:2–16). Surely it is not proper, he insists, for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered (v. 13). “Does not nature itself teach you that a man wearing his hair long brings disgrace upon himself? But a woman wearing her hair long brings honor upon herself, since her hair was given to her [by God and nature] as a covering” (vv. 14–15). For similar sentiments see Pseudo-Phocylides 212 and Epictetus, Disc. 3.1.25–31.

The Church Fathers, as Boswell has observed (339–41), did not use malakoi but rather other terms for “effeminate,” but they were certainly preoccupied with effeminacy (for which the related noun malakia sometimes was used) (Clement of Alexandria, PAEDAGOGUS 2, chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; for paederastia, see PAED. 2.10.83.5; 2.10.86.2). Effeminate were lumped together with prostitutes, violators of graves, murderers, thieves (Gregory Nazianzen, c. 1.2.2.496f; John Chrysostom, IN IOH. h. 33 [32].3; IN 2 TIM h. 6.4; IN HEIR. h. 2.4; inscr. alt. 1) and were disallowed from the Christian assemblies (Clement of Alexandria, PAED. 3.19.3, referring to Deuteronomy 22:5; cf. Philo, SPEC. LEG. 1.325; VIRT. 18–21; Josephus, ANT. 4.301; Clement of Alexandria, STROM. 2.81.3; TERT. SPECT. 23) and with ref. to 1 Cor. 6:9, TERT. PUD. 16; John Chrysostom, ILLUM. CAT. 1.25); see also Petersen 1989.

One aspect of Greek culture relevant to our topic was the emotional and loving relationships that could develop between a younger “soft” male, a “beloved” (érōmenos, related to eros, “love”) and an older male suitor, the “lover” (erastês) or “lover of the boy” (paiderastês). In the male-oriented and male-dominated culture of the time, such male-male love relationships often were preferred to male-female relations, especially by those wishing to avoid procreation in their sexual activity. In such love relationships involving young free males, their submission to senior lovers and their temporary adoption of the passive “feminine” role was acceptable under the condition that they felt no erotic desire for their elder partner but submitted only out of love. “The boy,” Socrates emphasized in Xenophon’s SYMPOSIUM (8.21), “does not share in the man’s pleasure in intercourse, as a woman does; cold sober, he looks upon the other drunk with sexual desire.” “It was clearly unacceptable, after all, Halperin aptly observes (130), for the future rulers of Athens to exhibit any eagerness or desire to submit themselves to anyone, especially to their (eventual) peers.”

For Israelites, intentional avoidance of the primary command to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28) was a grave violation of Torah and came under severe censure. Philo’s criticism of the lover-beloved relationship (CONTEMP. 59–62, cited above) included this point as well as other features of this partnership.

In a further extension of this cultural construct, malakoi could also designate males, particularly youths, who made their bodies soft and smooth by shaving and powdering them (as did women) and who sold themselves as male prostitutes (BDAG 613). The appearance of malakoi in the 1 Corinthians 6 list along with pornoì and maichoi (“immoral/prostitutes” and “adulterers”) would, in fact, favor this sense, as would the mention of prostitution in 6:15–20. In our modern culture, Robin Scroggs points out (106), such youths would be “call-boys,” young males who have sex with older males for pay, “who walked the thin line between passive homosexual activity for pleasure and that for pay.” The term “prostitute” implies sex for pay, then as now. So if malakoi in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and its source was referring to young male prostitutes (this sense appears to be assumed by the Zürcher version, NRSV, and NAB), it may have been the sex-for-pay angle that was deplored. In classical Athens, the hiring of young male prostitutes by senior males was a known practice, but the passive male prostitute himself, when he reached his majority, was barred from admission and participation in the public assembly (ekklesia) because his earlier abandoning of his maleness in playing the receptive role impugned his character and honor as a male (Halperin: 88–112; see also Krenkel). While such a situation is conceivable, there is an even more likely scenario where
pay was not a factor but rather unacceptable male passive and submissive behavior.

Here again the male-dominated Greek and Roman cultural context is important to keep in mind. Male to male relationships of friendship were prized over male-female relationships, since males were ranked superior to females (by other males, of course). Females, on the other hand, were viewed as misbegotten or defective males. They were necessary for reproduction and extending the family line and for doing all the shunt work at home. But actual friendships of equals or relationships of patrons and clients were normally forged only between males. Secondly, in Greco-Roman circles, education of males among elites (i.e., those who set the standards) conventionally involved the separation of young males (ca. 8 years) from their mothers and home, and their entrustment into the care of older male friends or relatives of the family who would assume responsibility for the boys' formal education. This older male was known in Greek as a paiderastes, a "pederast," i.e., a "lover/friend" (erast) of a "boy" (pod-, from pais) whose education (paideia) was being advanced. On pederasty see Marrow: 50–62, 479–82; Canledge; Patzer; Koch-Harnack; Percy; Nissinen: 57–62, in addition to coverage in the works listed above on page 8.

Such an arrangement could and often did lend itself to abuse, including sexual predation on the part of the pederasts and their subjection of the young male to sexual misuse and humiliation. A testament to this development was the translation of the Greek myth of Zeus' love for the beautiful youth Ganymede (reflecting and justifying "natural" and divinely sanctioned male-male relationships) into the "dirty old man" account of lecherous Zeus lusting after the dandy Ganymede. This produced the term catamitus in Latin (a Latin formulation derived from the word "Ganymede" in Greek) for the male passive partner in a male-to-male sexual relationship. On the Zeus-Ganymede myth see Lewis; Dover: 196–97. Catamitus, in turn, was transliterated into English as "catamite." Though such male relationships were commonplace among the elites, the sexual abuse possible in this relationship, as well as the general disapproval of males behaving as females, was a frequent target of moral scorn. The modern biblical versions translating malaqoi with "catamites" (Moffatt, JB) may have had this development in mind. The Greco-Roman myth, like the institution of pederasty itself, could have been known in Corinth among believers from a Gentile background. Among those of Israelite origin this would have been less likely since neither the myth nor the educational convention was an element of Israelite culture. Philo may be untypical. He does not employ the noun paederastia, but does use the verb paederasteó (SPEC. 2.50; 3.37; HYPOTh 7:1) and the noun paederastis (DECAL. 168; SPEC. 3.39; 4.89; CONTEMPL. 52, 61) only in reference to sexual relationships involving older males with younger males.

If malaqoi in 1 Corinthians 6:9 designated young males who (1) were under the tutelage of older males or were lovers of these older males and submitted to them sexually, or (2) submitted sexually to older males for pay, then the adjacent term arsenokoitai could have denoted the older male partners. In the former case, it could have been the corrupt and corrupting institution of pederasty that was found odious; in the latter case, it could have been the sex-for-pay factor. Already in antiquity, paying for something as natural as sexual intercourse degraded and shamed the act. What these two possibilities have in common is the fact that both cases would involve males taking on a perceived female role, submitting themselves to other males as though they were females, receiving in their anus the penis of the penetrating male and thus making "cunts" of themselves.

When in post-biblical times (and only then), the sin of the Sodomites was no longer understood to be inhospitality and rape of strangers (as it was throughout the biblical literature) but was thought to be the males of Sodom copulating with other males, Sodom and "sodomy" became terms for male same-sex sexual intercourse as well as anal intercourse, no matter by whom it was practiced. Neither Genesis 19 nor the Bible in general, of course, says anything of this, but one could imagine the contorted development of thought: the association of Sodom with male-male sexual intercourse would have presumed that the males of Sodom copulated with the visitors (regarding them as human males and not sexless angels), and this would have involved anal intercourse. Ergo "sodomy" "must" cover both male-male sexual intercourse and anal intercourse. That anal intercourse was practiced not only by males with males but males with females does not seem to have occurred to those who would find here in Genesis 19 a prohibition of male-with-male sexual relations. (On the invention of the conceptual construct "sodomy" see Jordan.)

The blurring or eradication of sexual boundaries, which were thought to have been established by nature, the gods, or the God of Israel, also drew Paul's censure and condemnation in his letter to the Romans (1:18–32) where "exchanging natural relations for unnatural" meant males behaving as females and females behaving as males. In this dishonorable distortion of nature and violation of God's will, it was not the sexual intercourse per se that was the bone of contention, but rather males pusillanimously acting as passive females or treating other males as females, and females presumptuously acting as aggressive males with other females and the latter cooperating in this transgression of sacred boundaries.

Arsenokoitai

The term arsenokoitās, the singular of arsenokoitai, is most unusual. It is not attested in Greek literature prior to 1 Corinthians, and it appears only rarely thereafter. In the Bible it appears only in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, in
both instances in vice lists pre-existing the writings in which they were included. The list of 1 Timothy (1:9–10) is presented to exemplify types of unjust persons for whom the law was laid down (1:8):

The law is not laid down for the just person [dikaios, v. 9] but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for man-slayers, for immoral persons/prostitutes, for arsenokoitai, kidnappers, liars, perjurers and whatever else opposes sound teaching [1:9–10].

The list of 1 Timothy serves the same general purpose as the list in 1 Corinthians 6; namely, to exemplify unjust persons engaged in conduct viewed as incompatible with the gospel (1 Tim 1:11) or membership in the community of the faithful (1 Cor 5–6). The precise meaning of arsenokoitai is just as uncertain in 1 Timothy as it is in 1 Corinthians. Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, writing in the first half of the second century to the church at Philippi, mentions both terms in his encouragement of young men or recent converts (5:3) to “be blameless in all things” and remove themselves from “worldly cravings.” Selecting language from the list of 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, he warns that “neither pornoi nor malakoi nor arsenokoitai will inherit the kingdom of God” so that “it is necessary to refrain from such things.” Here too is a list, but it is reduced to just three terms presumably relevant particularly to those enticed by the “cravings” (epithymiai, 5:3) of this world. This text is no clearer than its source on the specific meaning of these terms or their possible social or moral implications. As in 1 Corinthians, they are representative. Here, however, they are examples of “craving of the things in the world” from which believers should be “cut off.” The verb occurs in a proscription of behavior presented in St. Or. 2.73 (“Do not arsenokoitein, do not betray information, do not murder”), but again its context sheds little light on its specific meaning; for the infinitive see also Acts of John 36. The Apology of Aristides, a second century CE Christian text, contains a list of Gentile vices that ends with arsenokoitai (9:13; cf. also 9:8–9 (they are “mad after males” [arsenomanes] and the question about whether a god can be an adulterer or “corrupter of males” [androbates]).

Jerome, translating centuries later for a Latin-speaking audience, rendered arsenokoitai in both 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 with the same Latin phrase, masculorum concubitores, literally, “male bed-fellows of males”—an expression as unspecific in Latin as is the original Greek. However the meaning of arsenokoitai is to be established, it is clear that, like malakos, it is no technical or conventional term for males who have intercourse with other males.

In brief, the meaning of arsenokoitai (arsenokoitês in the singular) is as uncertain as the meaning of malakos, and its occurrences are even fewer. The components of arsenokoitê are arsen (‘male’) + koitê (‘bed,’ ‘marriage-bed;’ or figuratively, ‘sexual intercourse’ [‘go to bed with’]; or sexual emission [occurring in bed]). The gender of the word alone is ambiguous, occurring in a declension denoting either males or females. Thus it could denote “females lying/sleeping (around) with males” as well as “males lying” (Boswell: 345, n. 27). It is also uncertain whether arsen is to be understood as object or subject: i.e. a male or a person who lies with men (= object) or a male who lies with both women and men (as preferred by Boswell). Related terms beginning with arseno or arseno employ the form as subject: arsenogenê (‘male’), arsenothymos (‘male-minded’), arsenomorphos (having the form of a male”), arsenophanês (having a male appearance), thereby giving weight to the latter alternative. On the other hand, Jerome’s translation, masculorum concubitores (“males bedding with males), takes arseno as object. Determining the possible meaning(s) of the term arsenokoitai is made difficult by its rarity in the Greek world and by its presence in the NT in lists whose terms are not all expressly related to their literary and rhetorical contexts. In neither 1 Corinthians nor 1 Timothy do the authors focus directly on malakoi and arsenokoitai by commenting further on them and explaining their relevance to the points being made. While the factor of literary context is not completely irrelevant to a determination of meaning, it is not as helpful with respect to these terms as it is in most other cases.

Virtually no light is shed on the issue by extra-biblical texts. Contemporary Greek and Roman authors, when discussing male-male sexual relations, never use the term. The same is true of the Church Fathers, who, while commenting frequently on male-male sexual relations and drawing on a large vocabulary for this subject, never use the term arsenokoitai. This could suggest that the term arsenokoitai had no connection whatsoever with male same-sex behavior.

John Boswell sees the term as referring to “male prostitutes capable of the active role with either men or women” (344) and malakoi as possibly meaning “masturbators” (338–53). Inclusion of male prostitutes in this list of proscribed activities would be consistent with the condemnation of prostitution, both commercial and cultic, in Israel and the early Church. This sense of the term would also fit the context of 1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20, where prostitution is also discussed (6:15–20). On the other hand, the use of arsenokoitai to denote “male prostitutes” would involve a redundancy if pornoi at the outset of the list also meant “male prostitutes” rather than the more general “immoral males” or “males engaging in incest.” William Countryman (127–28, 202) follows Boswell, while Wright (1984) rejects his proposal; Peterson (1986) presents informative observations. The lump that malakoi means “masturbators” ignores, in my opinion, the large body of evidence attesting the antipathy toward effeminacy as the operative cultural.
value here, and introduces an activity that is only infrequently mentioned in ancient sources. It is also difficult to imagine how Paul could have viewed masturbation as an example of injustice (see 6:9a).

Robin Scroggs (83, 107-08) speculates that the term arsenokoitai may have been a Greek translation of the Hebrew mēshîq bāzār ("lying with a male"), a Rabbinic expression found in the Talmudic interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: “With a male you shall not lie the lyings of a woman” (Lev 18:22, Scroggs’ literal translation) and “If a male lies with a male the lyings of a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” (Lev. 20:13); see b. Sabbath 17b; b. Sukkah 29a; b. Sanhedrin 82a; y. Berakah 95.0.13c. The Hebrew formulations of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are obscure and unclear and the virtually equivalent LXX formulations are no clearer. Leviticus 18:22 LXX has: Καί μετὰ αρσένου οἵτινες αἱ γυναῖκες γυναικεῖον—literally “And with a male you shall not lie the woman lying/bed.” And Leviticus 20:13 LXX has: Καί ἤσοι οὗ τοιχὸν οἵτινες αἱ γυναῖκες γυναικεῖον—literally, “And whoever lies with a male the lying/bed of a woman...” In neither the Hebrew nor the Greek is it clear what exactly is forbidden: males lying with other males as they would with women so as to engage in some form of sexual intercourse ("lying of a woman" suggesting sexual intercourse), or, more specifically, males assuming the female passive role when lying sexually with other males ("lying of a woman" suggesting the passive, receptive role). As a pair, malakoi and arsenokoitai, Scroggs suggests, could have designated the passive and active partners respectively in male with male sexual intercourse. In this case, the malakoi would certainly have been adolescent males who had not yet grown beards, since “male prostitution,” at least as we know from classical Athens, “was largely the province of those below the age of majority” (Halperin: 90). This pairing of the two terms, however, is unique, occurring nowhere else in the entire Bible, and thus is in no way a standard expression. Moreover, the Rabbinic sources are much later than Paul, and probative evidence of any actual connection of arsenokoitai with an earlier Hebrew term or with the two texts of Leviticus has not been presented. Of the three NT texts claimed to refer to male-with-male sexual relations (Rom 1:18-32, 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10); none refers explicitly to, or quotes, Leviticus 18:22 or 20:13.

Frederick Danker, lexicographer non pareil, in the BDAG entry on arsenokoitai, also considers the component parts of the term and mentions as analogous a word occurring in extra-biblical Greek, mētōkoitai, meaning “one who has intercourse with his mother (mêter)” (BDAG 135). He then renders arsenokoitai “a male who engages in sexual activity w[ith] a pers[on] of his own sex, pederast... of one who assumes the dominant role in same-sex activity” (BDAG 135). This coincides with Scroggs’ view that in 1 Corinthians 6:9 “malakoi points to the effeminate call-boy” and arsenokoitai, to “the active partner who keeps the malakos as a ‘mistress’ or who hires him on occasion to satisfy his sexual desires” (108).

Accordingly, “a very specific dimension of pederasty is being denounced with these two terms,” a disapproval voiced frequently in the Greco-Roman world on the topic. “Romans forbade pederasty with[th] free boys in the Lex Scantinitt, precicer” (BDAG 135) and in general distanced themselves from male same-sex relations and labeled it “the Greek vice.” Second Temple Israel condemned male same-sex sexual relations and likewise considered it practiced only by “the other guys,” deploiting it as a typical Gentile vice; see Jub. 7:20-21; 13:17; 16:5-6; 20:5-6; T. Naphtali 3:4-5; 4:1; T. Asher 7:1; T. Benjamin 9:1; T. Levi 14:6; 2 Enoch 104; 24:2; 3 Macc 2:5; Sib. Or. 3:185, 594-600; 5:166-67; 5:386-96; Let. Aris. 152; Pseudo-Phocylides, 3, 190, 191, 215; Philo, ABR. 135-36; SPEC. 3.37-39; CONTEMPL. 59-62; Q. GEN. 4.37; Jos., AG, AP. 2.37.273-75.

The corruption of young boys by predatory older males came under heavy censure throughout the ancient world. Occasion for this vice was given in the cultural preference for male-male relations in general and in the operation of pederasty as an educational arrangement. The deviant aspect of pederasty was not the relationship as such, but the “effeminizing” of the younger males and their abuse by their senior tutors/lovers. In this relationship, older, established powerful males could and did abuse their younger, weaker, and socially inferior male partners. Thus we find the warning issued by an Israelite writer, “Guard the youthful prime of life of a comely boy, because many rage for intercourse with a man/male” (Pseudo-Phocylides, line 215 [1 century BCE-1 century CE]). Discussing the vices of an evil man, Philo observes that in regard to his tongue, belly, and genitals (ta gennētika),

He misuses them for abominable lusts and forms of intercourse forbidden by all laws. He not only attacks in his fury the marriage-beds of others, but even plays the pederast (paiderastos) and forces the male type of nature to debase and convert itself into the feminine form, just to indulge a polluted and accursed passion [SPECIAL LAWS 2.14.50].

His comment on the residents of Sodom in Abraham’s time (ON ABRAHAM 135-36, cited above on page 9) expressed similar notions. The description reflects pagan practices of Philo’s own time, which he imagined to have typified the residents of Sodom in Genesis 19, where none of these particulars is mentioned.

Emasculation and effeminization of males given to the “female disease” and the complicity of the active partners in this vice are also denounced even more extensively by Philo in his commentary on various violations of the sixth commandment of the
Decalogue and the obligation to procreate:

37. Much graver than the above [certain tactics used for avoiding conception in sexual intercourse and “ploughing the hard and stony ground,” 32–36] is another evil, which has ramped its way into the cities, namely pederasty/love of boys (to paideustēs). [Philo appears to be restating his interpretation of Leviticus 18 begun in 3.3.12, so that these words would constitute his comment on Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.] In the former days the very mention of it was a great disgrace, but now it is a matter of boasting not only to the active but to the passive partners who habituate themselves to endure the disease of effeminization (nason thēleian—literally, the “female disease”), let both body and soul run to waste, and leave no ember of their male sex-nature to smoulder. Mark how conspicuously they braid and adorn the hair of their heads, and how they scrub and paint their faces with cosmetics and pigments and the like, and smother themselves with fragrant unguents. For of all such embellishments, used by all who deck themselves out to wear a comely appearance, fragrance is the most seductive. In fact, the transformation of the male nature to the female is practiced by them as an art and does not raise a blush.

38. These persons are rightly judged worthy of death by those who obey the law, which ordains that the man-woman hybrid (ton androgyνον) who debases the sterling coin of nature should perish unavenged, suffered not to live for a day or even an hour, as a disgrace to himself, his house, his native land and the whole human race.

39. And the lover (to de paideustēs) of such may be assured that he is subject to the same penalty. He pursues an unnatural pleasure and does his best to render cities desolate and uninhabited by destroying/wasting the means of procreation [i.e. his semen]. Furthermore he sees no harm in becoming a tutor and instructor in the grievous vices of unmanliness and effeminacy (anandrίas kai malakίas) by prolonging the bloom of the young and emasculating (eκθέληνον) the flower of their prime, which should rightly be trained to strength and robustness. Finally like a bad husbandman he lets the deep-soiled and fruitful fields lie sterile, by taking steps to keep them from bearing, while he spends his labour night and day on soil from which no growth at all can be expected.

40. The reason is, I think, to be found in the prizes awarded in many nations to licentiousness and effeminacy (malakίas). Certainly you may see these man-woman hybrids (androgyνον) continually strutting about through the thick of the market, heading the processions at the feasts, appointed to serve as unholy ministers of holy things, leading the mysteries and initiations and celebrating the rites of Demeter.

41. Those of them who by way of heightening still further their youthful beauty have desired to be completely changed into women and gone on to mutilate their genital organs (ta genētīκα), are clad in purple like signal benefactors of their native lands, and march in front escorted by a bodyguard, attracting the attention of those who meet them. (SPECIAL LAWS 3.7.37–41. LCL modified).

Philo’s “androgyνes” (man-woman hybrids) were decidedly not homosexuals (as that term is understood today) but were imagined as males with both male and female sexual characteristics. The disgrace in which they were involved for Philo lay not in same-sex coitus, but in the partners’ dishonoring of maleness, the wasting of the senior partner’s power to procreate, and the passive partner’s assuming the “female disease” and adopting the ways of women. The prohibition of adultery, on which this discussion is a commentary, forbids the violation of a married male’s honor by the stealing/controlling of his wife. Philo’s concern with maintaining the honor of malehood by eschewing effeminacy is consistent with the Decalogue’s protection of male honor by prohibiting the theft of his chief property.

It may well be that Paul shared this view of his compatriot, Philo, and that a perceived violation of the gender boundaries understood as set by God and nature earned for both malakία and arsenokοιται their place in the list cited by Paul. In this view, both passive and active partners in a male-with-male sexual interaction colluded in a degradation of male virtue and male honor and thereby brought shame on all many males. The submissive partner was a passive patsy and receptive like a female. The active partner cooperated in the dishonoring of the passive male and in many instances even subjected the youth to further modes of physical abuse, economic subservience, insult, and social shaming. In this kind of liaison, the senior male was usually married to a woman and accustomed to regular coitus with women. In no case did he restrict himself to only male-male coitus. Thus even if arsenokοιτai is taken as a reference to such senior males, they hardly fit the definition of “homosexual” as understood today (males oriented to and engaging exclusively with other males in sexual relations).

If arsenokοιτai denoted not senior males who loved youths, but older males who preyed sexually on and abused young males, then it would be a synonym of the more common word paidophθορος, “corrupter of boys/children” (see TESTAMENT OF LEVI 17:11; BARN. 10:6). The related verb paidοφθορίν, “to corrupt boys/children,” appears in Christian lists of prohibited activities in DIDACHE 2:2 and BARNABAS 19:4; cf. also 10:6. Another list of vices characterizing “the way of death” (DIDACHE 5:1–2) includes “corrupters of God’s creatures” (phθορεις πλασμάτων theou), a formulation also included in a similar list of vices characterizing “the way of the Black One” (Satan) in the LETTER OF BARNABAS 20:1–2. The
combination of arsenokoitai with malakoi makes this conceivable in the case of 1 Corinthians 6:9 (contrast 1 Timothy 1:10, where only arsenokoitai occurs). Again, however, we are dealing only with possibilities on top of unclarities.

Renderings of malakoi and arsenokoitai by a single expression such as "homosexuals" (RSV 1946), or "sexual perverts" (Revised English Bible 1989), or "homosexual perverts" (TEV 1966) or "men guilty of unnatural crime" (Weymouth NT 1943) are, in any case, "lexically unacceptable" (BDAG 135), apart, I would add, from their incorrectness in other respects. Along with the concepts of "heterosexuality" and "bisexuality," the concept of "homosexuality" is a modern construct, as is the notion of "perversion" as currently defined. All these concepts are modern in their conceit and formulation. They are absent from the world of the Bible and alien to its thought, which knows nothing of "sexual identity" or "sexual orientation" which rather attends to specific persons voluntarily involved in specific acts. In regard to the lexical aspect of the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai, neither in and of itself states anything about "unnatural" or "perversion," or "crime."

A Summary of the Foregoing Analysis and Exegetical Conclusions

Consideration of whether or not 1 Corinthians 6 condemns, or says anything about, homosexuality requires attention to several interrelated factors.

The lexical factor

The terms malakoi and arsenokoitai are rare in the Bible; arsenokoitai appears nowhere in the Greek language prior to 1 Corinthians and rarely thereafter. Their meanings are ambiguous and uncertain. They were not technical or standard terms for persons who engaged in male-to-male sexual intercourse or even for "males who love other males." Malakoi means "soft." It is possible that in this context it had a sexual implication, but this is not certain. It cannot be assumed, as its only other NT occurrences make clear. The word arsenokoitai is more likely to have had sexual implication, by virtue of its components ("males" + "bed") and (as Scruggs has argued) its similarity to the expression of Leviticus 18:23 and 20:16. This too, however, is not certain and cannot simply be assumed. With a sexual implication, malakoi could have designated "effeminate" males adopting the ways of women. It is also possible that malakoi and arsenokoitai formed a pair of words that designated passive and active male partners in a same-sex sexual relationship. Even if the terms are supposed to have had sexual overtones, the precise nature of the relationship and the sexual behavior is unstated by Paul. All translations or interpretations offer no more than conjectures. They are best left as vague as are the original Greek words: "soft males" and "males who lie with males."

The factor of literary context

The terms are part of a traditional Israelite pre-Pauline list of persons not inheriting the kingdom of God. Some of the persons and their actions are sexual in nature ("adulterers," possibly pornoi, if it is taken as meaning "prostitutes" or "males engaging in incest" rather than "idolators" or merely "immoral persons"), but not the majority of the remaining terms ("idolaters," "greedy," "drunkards," "revilers," "robbers"). Moreover, aside from the term pornoi, which is mentioned first and hence given pride of place, no term is singled out as especially pernicious; all have equal weight. The list in its totality does not have a sexual focus. No stress is given to the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai in particular. The theory that they were added by Paul to fit the general theme of porneia in 5:1–6:20 (as argued by Zas) is made doubtful by the fact that Paul says nothing about them anywhere else in his letter and never employed them or this list in any other of his extant genuine letters.

There is also the factor of cultural context; that will be discussed below in connection with the evaluation of translations.

The factor of rhetorical function

Paul employed this list in 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, not to make a point about sexual activity, but to respond to a legal problem that had social rather than sexual ramifications. Believers were suing one another in outsider pagan courts of law and submitting their cases to persons Paul considered unjust judges (6:1–8). Unjust/unrighteous persons like these, Paul said, will not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9a). The persons enumerated in vv 9b–10 illustrate kinds of such unjust/unrighteous persons and behavior. The focus of 6:1–11 is on justice/injustice and the internal settling or elimination of brotherly disputes so as to preserve and enhance the unity of the community. The function of the list, in other words, was to illustrate kinds of unjust/unrighteous persons who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Injustice is the focal issue, not sexual activity, sexual sins, or sexual "perversions." In terms of the letter’s message in general, we can join Zas who insists (629) that "we must agree with Scruggs that Paul is not using these catalogues to argue against specific vices like arsenokoitai, but in a broader sense, as part of an argument about 'harming the body,' about the sanctity of the brotherhood, and about the separation of church and world."

It is in the light of these three exegetical factors that the determination of the meaning and function of malakoi and arsenokoitai in this context is to be made.
The meaning of the terms

The great disparity among Bible translations and commentaries indicates that there has been and remains no consensus concerning the meaning of these terms, whether they involve sexual matters, let alone “homosexual” or same-sex activity, what activity or social relations the terms might imply, and what might qualify these activities or relations as immoral. While many questions must remain open for lack of probative evidence, a few things are clear and certain.

- Neither malakoi nor arsenokoitai can be translated with “homosexuals,” a term of modern coinage, shaped by modern conceptions of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation (against the RSV 1946, TEV 1976, NEB 1971, NAB). The concept of “sexual orientation” and its distinction from “sexual practice” also are foreign to the ancient world and alien to its prevailing mentality. The modern translation “inverted” (Nueva Biblica Espanola) is wrong for the same reason; the concept of sexual inversion is a modern one unknown in the ancient world. Versions mentioning “perversion” (NEB) or “pervert(s)” (RSV 1971, TEV, Rev. EB) are likewise wrong on this score. All these translations are reflections of modern psychological concepts anachronistically attributed to Paul and his source.

- Also incorrect are all translations that collapse the two terms malakoi and arsenokoitai into one modern expression such “men guilty of unnatural crime” (Weymouth), “homosexuals” (RSV 1946), “homosexual perversion” (NEB 1961), “sexual perverts” (RSV 1971), or “homosexual perverts” (TEV).

- The choice of “sodomites” for arsenokoitai (Moffatt, JB, NRSV 1989, Nueva Biblica Espanola, Sacra Bibbia) also is inappropriate and likewise should be eliminated. The term arsenokoitai itself had no inherent connection with Sodom and its sin. It is the translators alone who make the association, apparently on the inferred but unproved web of assumptions that (1) arsenokoitai refers to male to male sexual intercourse; (2) that the sin of the residents of Sodom as narrated in Genesis 19 was not that of inhospitality (as the story and later biblical references to Sodom indicate) or violent raping of visitors (as Genesis 19 indicates), but voluntary sexual intercourse among males, so that (3) the persons identified in the list and by Paul as arsenokoitai are best identified as “sodomites.” Whether “sodomites” involves only the choice of sexual partners (males preferring males) or the mode of sexual intercourse (anal intercourse) is a question on which proponents of this inaccurate rendition make no comment. As a consequence some modern state courts of law in the United States still criminalize anal intercourse (even between married heterosexual partners) because legislators are guided and motivated by the erroneous translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and an equally misinformed understanding of Genesis 19 and its cultural context.

- Translations of malakoi such as “sensual” (Goodspeed), or “depraved” (BJ), or “self-indulgent” (NJB 1985) have the virtue of a vagueness that parallels the vagueness of “soft.” They could have a sexual implication, but not necessarily so. Consequently, these translations make the verses irrelevant to the question of whether 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 has a bearing on male-to-male sexual relations or on the modern issue of homosexuality, except to imply a negative answer to both questions.

- The KJV rendition of arsenokoitai as “abusers of themselves with mankind” does not indicate the type or domain of the self-abuse. Though “self-abuse” became a designation for masturbation in the Victorian period, it is not likely implied here, given the accompanying words, “with mankind.” A social activity, in other words, is implied—unless the translators regarded male to male sexual intercourse as a form of mutual masturbation. Its pairing with “effeminate” probably points to a sexual implication of arsenokoitai. The only thing certain is that the translating expression emphasizes abuse as the immoral aspect of this term.

The cultural framework

The specific connotations of malakoi and arsenokoitai were determined by the knowledge, perspectives, concepts, values, norms, practices and institutions of the Greco-Roman world, Hellenistic Israel, and the fledgling Jesus movement. This cultural framework included a patriarchal, male-oriented and male-dominated society; the valorization of male-male relationships over male-female relationships (except for child production); the economic and social importance of family increase as such; the scorn of effeminacy; the educational and cultural institution of pederasty and its potential abuses; the power and pollution of sex; and culptic prostitution viewed as idolatry. Preferable translations are those that reflect and are consistent with these social and cultural factors.

- Versions that suggest that the original terms were pointing to persons behaving “unnaturally,” or “contrary to nature” (Goodspeed, Knox, Weymouth) are culturally plausible, since nature (and nature’s Creator or God) was believed to have established the characteristics (physical, mental, moral) and behavioral scripts of all males and females. Persons acting contrary to nature were seen by Israelites like Paul as acting contrary to the will of God and hence as “sinsful” and “immoral.” In his letter to the Romans (1:18–32) Paul argues thus, censoring males and females who have acted contrary to their natures and “exchanged natural relations for unnatural” (1:26, 27). The problem with imagining an appeal to nature here in 1 Corinthians 6 is that the terms themselves and the text in which they are embedded say nothing explicit about “nature” or the “unnatural.” The idea appears only in the minds of translators
who would view and translate malakoi and arsenokoitai in the light of Rom 1:18–32. Also damaging to this notion is the fact that other terms of the list involve actions that are not “unnatural” but all too natural and typical of the human condition (immorality, idolatry, adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, reviling). Malakoi and arsenokoitai may imply actions that would have been viewed by some in Paul’s world as “unnatural,” but Paul does not make that case here and it is best to avoid language suggesting that he does.

• Closer still to Paul’s cultural world and to what he does say in 1 Corinthians are the versions that render malakoi as “effeminate(s)” (Vulgate, KJV, Luther, La Biblia, La Sacra Bibbia) or “Lustknaben” (Zürcher), “carnimates” (Moffatt, JB1966), or “boy/male prostitutes” (NAB, NRSV), and arsenokoitai as “males sleeping with males” (Vulgate), or “corrupters of boys” (Luther, Zürcher), and possibly “(male) abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV). While not technical Greek terms for males engaged sexually with other males and while not commonly employed, these words could be pointing to various male-to-male sexual relations that in Paul’s time were practiced by the Greeks, tolerated with exasperation by the Romans, and denounced by the House of Israel as typical of Gentile degeneracy and moral depravity. The problem with the behavior and/or the relations is that in some way they were seen to violate the gender boundaries set by nature (and God), with males assuming the passive role and inferior position of females, and their male partners being complicit in this distortion of maleness and masculine honor. In regard to the institution of pederasty, while the relationship of older males to younger boys once had a useful educational function, it eventually became an occasion for abuse, commercialization, and corruption. Older men forced themselves on young boys, abusing them physically, using them as play things (Lustknaben) and, in some cases enticing them to literally peddle their asses for sex and sestercies. Dandified and perfumed youth, on the other hand, switched from active to passive, shaved and powdered their bodies, assumed the posture and role of receptive, soft females, sold their butts to the highest bidders, and for the sake of money and the protection of powerful patrons played the role of the passive lover (like Ganymede to Zeus) as long as necessity demanded, occasion permitted, and time allowed.

• If the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai had a sexual implication for Paul and his source, it is possible that one of the above scenarios lay behind this sexual connotation. Malakoi could have denoted “effeminate males.” Or, if malakoi and arsenokoitai formed a pair of words indicating some kind of sexual relationship and behavior, malakoi could have designated youth playing the passive role of females in male to male sexual relations of beloved and lover, or youth playing the passive role of females in male to male sex-for-pay transactions. Arsenokoitai, in turn, could have denoted the dominant, and often abusive, male partners who were complicit in these acts of male humiliation or sex for pay and of older males corrupting tender youth.

• While none of these options can be proved as envisioned by Paul, each is at least lexically possible and contextually plausible. With such meanings, this pair of terms would be semantically compatible with the other terms of the list, each of which denotes some form of excess (greed, drunkenness) or type of conduct condemned by Israel’s God or the mos maiorum, the customs of the ancestors (immorality, idolatry, adultery, theft, reviling). With these meanings they would also fit the context of 6:1–11 and join the other terms listed in vv 9–10 as indicating types of unjust/unrighteous persons excluded from the kingdom of God. This possibility is also compatible with what is known about sexual relationships, sexual values, and sexual norms in Paul’s period. It must be acknowledged, however, that these are only possibilities that are more likely than other alternatives. The available evidence does not allow a definitive conclusion or a dernier mot.

• In the ancient world of the Bible, in contrast to the present, no distinction was drawn between personal sexual “orientation,” on the one hand, and behavior on the other. Persons were classified according to their origin (blood line and locality), looks, and behavior—external factors, not internal states—since only external features were visible and verifiable. God alone could look inside and know the heart. The terms in the lists cited in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere in the NT and secular documents refer, not to persons of a particular condition, i.e. the “condition” of adultery, theft, greed, etc., but to persons engaging in specific violent, abusive, immoderate, socially destructive, or religiously proscribed acts. Paul and his ancient contemporaries regarded the persons and implied actions enumerated in the lists of 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 as agents capable of choosing between moral and immoral modes of behavior, and their preferences, whether good or evil, as free and deliberate choices. Desire and choice were the operative forces, not “orientation.”

• A passage of the 1–2 century Epistle of Barnabas could relate to 1 Corinthians 6:9 and in any case offers a sobering eye-opener concerning the state of knowledge about sexual matters in Paul’s age. The pericope, BARN. 10:6–8, presents reasons for the food prohibitions in Leviticus and for the classification of certain animals as “unclean”:


Do not, he means, be a corrupter of boys [paidophiôn] or like such people, because the hare grows a new anus every year, and their number is proportionate to its years [cf. Aelianus, De Natura Animalium 1.25; Clement of Alexandria, Paëdagogus 2.10.83–84, etc.].
But "neither shall you eat the hyena" [not in Lev or OT, but added by the author of Barnabas].

Do not, he means, be an adulterer or corrupter (phthoreus) or like such people. Why? Because this animal changes its sex every year, and is at one time male, at another, female.

But he also rightly abhorred the weasel [Lev. 11:29; cf. Aelianus, De Anim. 2.55].

Do not, he means, be like those males who, we learn, because of their uncleanness, do what is forbidden with their mouth; and do not associate with unclean women who do what is forbidden with their mouth; for this animal conceives through the mouth.

In the famous and regularly used Loeb Classical Library series, the English translation of the Greek text of Barnabas is abruptly interrupted at this point and Latin is substituted for English—apparently to avoid offending the sensibilities of its vulnerable readers. It is, however, this "real dirty stuff" that reveals not only the ignorance of the ancients but also the prudishness of modern scholars. This bizarre explanation offered in BARNABAS is repeated almost verbatim by Clement of Alexandria († ca. 215 CE) in his Paedagogus (2.10).

If arsenokoitai in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is seen to denote older males sexually corrupting young boys, then this passage of BARNABAS illustrates the theological and ethical reasoning underlying the early Christian censure of this practice. From a hermeneutical perspective, the text illustrates the need for great caution in the use of any biblical argument based on what is natural or what nature teaches. As our knowledge of nature has changed drastically since ancient time, so must our ethical reasoning once based on what nature teaches. This text of BARNABAS also illustrates how weak and arbitrary ethical rules are that are based on an allegorical mode of interpretation.

• Paul’s concern in citing the list in which these terms are contained was to illustrate modes of unjust behavior typical of Gentile unbelievers and to prescribe such behavior as inimical to the moral and social integrity of the believing community and incompatible with its holiness. These are behaviors that do not exhibit but rather inhibit love—a focus on and concern for others of one’s primary group, like the love one has towards one’s family (8:1; 13:1—13). In 1 Corinthians, it is this love serving to maintain and build up the unity of the community, the body of Christ, that is Paul’s vital concern. The list in 6:9—10 enumerates the types of persons who are unjust/unrighteous.

Within the argument that Paul is making here, the persons of this list illustrate types of such unjust/unrighteous persons who, like believers who put themselves before the needs of the group, drag their fellow believers into pagan courts of law and ignore the communal well-being of the Corinthian faithful. The listed persons do not practice justice, they do not act in love toward their fellows, and they do not contribute to the building up of the communal Body of Christ.

Some Broader Hermeneutical Observations—Exegetical and Hermeneutical Principles and Implications

The body of the first letter to the Corinthians opens with Paul’s stress on “Christ crucified” and the paradoxical power of the gospel (1:18—31). It closes with a resounding affirmation of the resurrection of Christ and of all believers (15:1—58). Between opening and close, more attention is given to sexual issues than in any other NT writing. This indicates that, for Paul, crucifixion and resurrection set the hermeneutical framework within which sexual issues are to be viewed and treated. Those who today claim to stand within the Pauline tradition can be expected to follow Paul’s lead. If this present paper were a study of Paul’s view on sexuality in general, this is precisely the direction I would have taken. I would have shown how Paul’s insistence on the unity and inclusiveness of the believing community as the Body of Christ, his concern with the consolidation of that body through love and putting the brother or sister before self, his interweaving of Christ’s personal body (crucified and resurrected), Christ’s social body, the church, and Christ’s eucharistic body; and his emphasis on the creating and recreating action of God bringing a new eschatological, physical and social reality into existence all established a context for comprehending his teaching on sexual relations and responsibilities.

The present essay, however, is more narrow in scope and has focused on a subordinate issue and a passage, 1 Corinthians 6:9—10, that has been claimed to speak of and condemn “homosexuals” and “homosexuality.” The conclusion of the study is that this claim is unsubstantiated, erroneous and methodologically misguided. Several points lead to this conclusion.

1. Accurate translation and interpretation requires that words, phrases, and sentences be understood and interpreted always with reference to their literary, historical, social and cultural context(s). Any translation or interpretation ignoring this principle of contextuality will inevitably misrepresent and distort the meaning of the original text. This is the hermeneutical principle of contextual interpretation. Many translations or interpretations of malakoi and arsenokoitai violate this principle of contextual interpretation, as indicated above. Leland White, recently deceased co-editor of Biblical Theology Bulletin, made the same point in this journal several years ago in his study focused on Romans 1, Does the Bible Speak about Gays or Same-Sex Orientation? (1995). His answer in the negative points out the several differences in perspectives and values dis-
tistinguishing ancient from modern conceptual frameworks, differences that disallow any use of the Bible as hot off the divine press. His cogent study of 2001 examines the same biblical text of Romans 1 in even further detail.

2. Since malakoi and arsenokoitai are not technical or recurrent terms for same-sex sexual relations, it is not certain that they relate in any way to the issue of same-sex sexual relations then or now. The adjective malakos, meaning “soft,” could denote various features of things or persons depending on context, only some of which had sexual implications. In its only other NT occurrence, it meant “soft” (modifying clothing) with no sexual overtones whatsoever. The noun arsenokoitai is so rarely attested that a precise meaning (as indicated by usage) is impossible to determine, though the components of the word and its combination with malakoi could suggest possibilities with sexual implications.

3. Certain renditions of malakoi and arsenokoitai are linguistically possible and culturally plausible, but not exegetically prohibitive beyond the shadow of doubt.

- In the light of Paul’s male-dominated, male-oriented, machismo-driven culture, it is possible but not certain that malakoi and arsenokoitai denoted effeminate and domineering male partners respectively in abusive or commercialized sexual relationships. This meaning, however, is a supposition based on what is known about the culture of Paul’s world and on semantic possibilities (but not certainties) of the terms themselves.

The hermeneutical significance of this uncertainty is the severe limits it sets on the use that can be made of these terms today for theological or ethical purposes. The relevant hermeneutical principle governing the use of ancient texts in modern settings states that where meanings of terms are unclear and implications of terms uncertain in the original text, great caution is required in the use of these terms in theological or ethical reasoning. No ethical rules can be based on unclear concepts. Theological doctrines and ethical rules cannot be based on exegetical suppositions and conflicting modern translations. Any attempt to do so leads only to unclarity concerning the rules themselves, confusion concerning the rationale behind their formulation, and inconsistency in their enforcement. Accordingly, the lexical ambiguity and semantic uncertainty of the terms malakoi and arsenokoitai in 1 Corinthians 6:9 advise extreme caution regarding the theological and ethical use of this passage today.

- What is certain is that neither term can accurately be translated “homosexuals,” and neither word relates to the phenomenon of homosexuality as currently defined and understood. Claims that this passage and these terms speak to the issue of “homosexuality” as defined and understood today are erroneous, because neither Paul nor any other biblical author—nor any author at all from antiquity—had any term for, or concept of, what is defined today as a “homosexual.” Stressing the difference between ancient and modern “mentalities” concerning sexual relations and same-sex sexual relations, Wolfgang Stegemann makes the same point (Stegemann 1993a, 1999b, 1998a). “The idea of the homosexual person as one who is exclusively or predominantly attracted to members of same sex,” William Countryman has correctly stressed (11 “appears to have been unknown to them [i.e. ancient Greco and Romans]. Assuming that “human beings are attracted sexually both to their own and the opposite sex,” these ancients, including Paul and his contemporaries, he observes, “lack even a behavior-based category for people who showed a fixed preference for partners of the same sex.” Marti Nissinen (11 similarly insists that the “modern concept of ‘homosexual’ should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 ‘condemn all homosexual relations’ in all times and places and ways.” So also Peters 1986: “The meanings of the terms are too vague to justify the claim, and Paul’s words should not be used for generalization that go beyond his experience and world.” Indeed, to claim that malakoi and arsenokoitai were “homosexuals” would be anachronistic as claiming that methylsai (1 Cor 6:10) were “alcoholics” or “addicts,” or that lidairoi (1 Cor 6:10) were “trash talkers,” or that pleonektai (1 Cor 6:10) were rapacious “capitalists.” It would be as ethnocentric as claiming that their day Jesus was viewed as an “extrovert” or Paul as a “laid-back” or “leftwing progressive.” It would be like imagining that ancient Mediterraneans thought and behaved like mid-20th century Americans. Translating malakoi and arsenokoitai as “homosexuals” is as anachronistic and ethnocentric as claims that Paul and the biblical authors were aware of X and Y chromosome sexual orientation, and HIV.

4. Whatever meanings are accepted for these terms today an attempt to use them today for theological and ethical purposes faces further hermeneutical constraints posed by their literal context and rhetorical function. The fact that malakoi and arsenokoitai are part of a list used by Paul to illustrate unjust/unrighteous persons in a context dealing with injustice (Cor 6:1–11) has several hermeneutical implications.

- If an attempt is made to find theological and ethical significance in this text for today’s situation, then all the terms 6:9–10 must be weighted equally today, as they were by Peter. There can be no singling out of malakoi and arsenokoitai as greater importance or gravity and no ignoring the other types of persons censured by Paul. If it is held today that malakoi are arsenokoitai are excluded today from the kingdom of God a from the Church because the Bible demands it” (with reference to these verses), then this censure must be applied to all types of 6:9–10. One must then also exclude from the kingdom of God today all who are immoral (or prostitutes or engaged in incestuous relationships), all idolaters, adulterers, thieves, gree persons, drunks, revilers, and robbers. And vice versa: t
manner in which these other vices are evaluated in a contempo-
rary ethic will, for the sake of consistency, apply to malakoi and
arsenokoitai as well. If greed or drunkenness or reviling are no
longer viewed as activities preventing inheritance of the king-
dom of God, then the same will have to be true of the actions of
malakoi and arsenokoitai, whatever they may be.

* This hermeneutical principle of consistency applies, by the
way, to the theological and ethical treatment of other supposedly
relevant texts such as Leviticus 18 (degrees of incest, intercourse
during menstruation, adultery, males "lying with males the lyings
of females," bestiality, idolatry) and Leviticus 20 (child sacrifice,
engaging in magic, cursing parents, incest, males lying with
males the lyings of females, bestiality, intercourse during men-
struation, distinction of clean and unclean animals and food),
Romans 1 (idolatry, gender role reversal, unholy and dishonor-
able conduct, and the twenty-one vices of 1:29-31), and 1
Timothy (lawless and disobedient persons, ungodly and sinners,
unholy and profane persons, patricides and matricides, prostit-
tutes, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and false teachers).

* In actuality, in the past 2,000 years this hermeneutical
principle concerning totality and consistency has enjoyed only
occasional enforcement. For the most part, subjectivity and
selectivity have prevailed in how the Bible has been applied eth-
ically. The vices mentioned in this passage were differently
weighted by different readers in different situations. Some vices
were considered more serious than others. Some were catego-
rized as "mortal" sins (incest, idolatry), others as "venial"
(theft, reviling). Adultery just a generation ago was grounds for
exclusion from Holy Communion and legal grounds for divorce.
This is no longer the case today in 2003 when excommunica-
tion no longer "works," no fault divorce has become a reality,
and divorce no longer disqualifies from the holy ministry.
Curiously and inconsistently, being malakoi and arsenokoitai—
anachronistically understood as referring to "homosexuals"
(male and female) who engage in same-sex sexual relations—is
allowed to disqualify from ministry in several modern denomina-
tions, while divorce, which the Lord himself prohibited
(Mark 10:2-12), raises nary an eyebrow, let alone protest.

* On the other hand, the ancient revulsion against emas-
culation, effeminacy, and males assuming, or forced into, the
passive role of females is far less pervasive today. The effemi-
nization of males that was seen by the biblical communities as a
violation of nature and God's will is no longer an issue of moral
or legal consequence—at least in cultures of the modern west-
ern hemisphere. Furthermore, rare are the religious bodies
today that exclude thieves or greedy persons, or drunkards or
revilers or robbers or even adulterers or prostitutes, or idolaters
from the kingdom of God and the precincts of the sanctuary. By
what criterion, then, are exceptions made in regard to malakoi
and arsenokoitai? The only criterion that seems to be evident in
practice is that of personal dislike or fear—what translators or
commentators or church officials or self-appointed posses of the
morality squad have as their peev or phobia. It may be that
a thorough study of this subject must include an examination of
such phobias and peeves in order to ascertain why the issue of
homosexuality has become such a focus of attention in the first
place and why gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons
are so high today on many peoples' phobia and hate lists.

* If 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is explored for ethical signifi-
cance today, all terms of the list must be related today to the
issue of justice/injustice, as they were by Paul. Being malakoi
and arsenokoitai, like being any other of the persons listed, will
be viewed as wrong today for the same reason this was declared
wrong by Paul—because of the injustice in which these persons,
like all the persons listed, were involved. This hermeneutical
principle of interpretive fidelity (fidelity to the point and rhetor-
cal thrust of the original argument) also is often violated in the
rush for ethical application. If it had been observed in the hunt
for homosexuals, persons wishing to apply this text today would
be asking how modern-day malakoi and arsenokoitai are acting
unjustly.

5. Another hermeneutical constraint on the contemporary
use of this text involves historical, social and cultural differences
separating Paul's society and cultural horizons from those of the
modern, post-Enlightenment, western, industrialized world of
most contemporary Bible readers. These differences in contexts,
conceptual constructs, and horizons of meaning must be
acknowledged and allowed to guide any theological and ethical
use of the Bible today. Failure to do so results in reading into
the text what should be derived from the text, eisegesis instead
of exegesis, and imposition of modern concepts, constructs, and
vocabulary instead of exposition of ancient ones. The ultimate
consequence is a distorted and misleading reading of the text,
an abuse rather than sound use of the Bible for theological and
ethical purpose.

* The specific modes, expressions, and implications of male-
male sexual relations and their possible ethical evaluation in 1
Corinthians or elsewhere in the Bible in general are conditioned
by their own historical, social, cultural and religious contexts.
These contextual factors may be, and in most cases are, different
from those shaping current understanding and evaluation of the
nature and practice of homosexuality. As in all cases where the
Bible is used as a norm for modern ethical reflection, these dif-
fferences must be taken seriously. Failure to do so has resulted and
will continue to result in a distorted anachronistic and ethnocentric
reading of biblical texts, a disregard and denial of the historicity
of the word of God and the doctrine of the incarnation, and a mess
of rules rendered implausible and impracticable because isolated
from their original contexts of meaning.

* The difference in social structures and cultural horizons
between Paul's world and the present makes it difficult, if not
impossible, to directly apply Paul's exhortation and mode of
argumentation in 1 Corinthians 5-6 to today’s scene in the USA. This is not only due to the unclarity of certain of Paul’s terms, like malakoi and arsenokoitai or pornos, porne and porneia. It is also because the social and cultural premises informing Paul’s arguments and the cultural perceptions of our world. Excommunication (1 Cor 5:1–13) no longer is effective and no longer practiced as an ecclesiical disciplinary tactic because the social premise on which it was based is no longer shared by today’s post-Enlightenment, western, industrialized world. A theory of rugged individualism, personal independence, and appeal to a putative “interiorized” sense of morality or “conscience” has today replaced the group orientation, dyadic personality, and group-centered morality typical of Jesus’ and Paul’s world. Consequently, excluding persons from the community does not make sense and does not “work,” and so it is no longer practiced in the western Church. Or it is effective only in those situations or cultures (like those of the Mediterranean or Middle East or traditional face-to-face groups) where the group orientation of Paul’s culture and ethos is still in evidence.

On the other hand, nothing in 1 Corinthians, or for that matter in any other biblical writing, speaks directly of the biological or psychological condition of homosexuality or homosexual “orientation” as this is understood today and as it concerns believing Christian gay persons intent on worshipping and serving God.

• This interpretive hermeneutical problem applies to all of 1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20, all of 1 Corinthians, and all of the Bible in general. Paul’s ethical requirements and proscriptions, like those throughout the NT, presume a constellation of specific social-economic arrangements, religious perspectives, and cultural scripts. The plausibility and persuasive power of these ethical injunctions required that his hearers shared this complex of arrangements and scripts. The meaning of malakoi and arsenokoitai, the cultural and social practices Paul assumed these terms to have reflected, and the nature and rhetorical thrust of Paul’s exhortation were all fundamentally shaped by the cultural world Paul inhabited.

• In regard to the theological and ethical use of this text, this means that the passage and Paul’s argument will be plausible and persuasive only in those situations today where similar social and cultural conditions prevail. This will be in very few places around the modern world. It will certainly not be the case in the United States and modern industrialized and democratized cultures in general. From this vantage point also, the text will have little relevance for US religious denominations examining the issue of homosexuality and its theological and ethical ramifications. Theological doctrines and ethical rules cannot be based on biblical texts whose rationales and plausibility are based on cultural perceptions, values, and worldviews no longer held or considered valid.

• Put in more general terms, modern use of, and appeal to, biblical ethical rules (proscriptions and proscriptions) today will have little plausibility or persuasive power if modern readers do not also accept the premises and perceptions and script underlying these ancient injunctions. This is a hermeneutical observation that pertains to the use today of any verse or passage of Scripture for ethical or theological purpose. On the other hand, principles drawn from biblical passages can better weather the passage from antiquity to the present (e. g., such principles as; “that act is forbidden that is inconsistent with the gospel as proclaimed by Jesus and the NT authors”; or “that act is allowed that builds up the body of Christ”).

6. Today we study the biological, psychological, and psychosomatic dimensions of sexuality and homosexuality, dimensions unimagined or differently conceived by Paul and his contemporaries. We speak of “X” and “Y” chromosomes and speculate about genes as determinative of gender and orientation—factors as alien to Paul and Jesus as the computer and saran wrap. Today some researchers and church bodies accept the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual conduct, a distinction also unknown to Paul and the ancients. Some today regard a homosexual orientation, like a heterosexual or bisexual orientation, as something conveyed in the genes and transmitted by nature and/or given by God. In this case, it is not one’s sexual “orientation” that is “immoral” but the acting out of that supposedly God-given orientation. This is the official position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which therefore requires abstention from sexual intercourse on the part of all ordained clergy with an admitted homosexual orientation. In theory, church officials and congregations are eager to have homosexuals declare their orientation and abstain from sexual activity. In actuality, church practice emulates that of the military and whispers “don’t ask, don’t tell.” The position of the ELCA concerning the sexual activity of gay homosexuals is less clear and perhaps for this reason less enforced. Other Protestant bodies seem to swim in similar types of murky theological and ethical soup. The official Roman Catholic position that homosexuals are in their natures “disordered” is a position informed more by natural law theory than by the Bible. The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on October 31, 1986—the Festival of the Reformation (I)—states that “[a]lthough the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil; and thus the inclination itself must be seen as an objective disorder” (53). The text of the Letter is printed in full in Gramick & Furey: 1–10; the remainder of the volume contains informative analyses and critiques. A merit of this position is that it avoids the problem of viewing the Creator as the source of a “condition” or “orientation” of which the church forbids a sexual
expression. Presumably the thought is that “disordered” conditions can be “healed” and rightly “ordered,” experience to the contrary notwithstanding. Theoretically, the issue is irrelevant to the orientation and activity of Roman Catholic clergy, however, since celibacy is required of all, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. At the same time, the view of homosexuals as “disordered” in their sexuality also includes the clergy under the “disordered” umbrella. Ultimately there is no consistency here either. In sum, confusion continues to prevail in the churches, with honesty, transparency of policy, and courage to confront the issues directly all too often sacrificed on the altar of institutional expediency and fear of reversing earlier unenlightened positions.

As with 1 Corinthians, so with the Bible as a whole, the evidence concerning male-male sexual relationships is too sparse, too ambiguous, and conditioned by cultural perceptions and behavioral patterns too alien to those of modern times to provide an adequate basis for a contemporary ethic of homosexuality as homosexuality is currently understood. Conversely, the gender constructs, sexual norms, and rationales involved in the biblical texts that are thought relevant to the issue of homosexuality are inconsistent with current scientific data and thinking concerning gender, sexuality, sexual identity, sexual choice, and ethical practice of the present. A case for or against the morality of homosexuality as it is understood today will have to be made on evidence other than the six biblical passages (including 1 Corinthians 6:9–10) customarily cited. The silver lining in this dark exegetical cloud is that this may direct researchers to other scriptural sources more appropriate for viewing sexuality in creational, evangelical, redemptive, and spiritual terms and particularly within the Pauline framework of crucifixion and resurrection.

Works Cited

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