

# Don't Be Silly:

## The Term *Arsenokoitai* ("men lying with a male") in 1 Cor 6:9 Is Not Limited to Pederasts

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I am surprised by how many people have contacted me on social media to ask me about this online interview/article, [Has Homosexual Always Been In The Bible?](#) (Mar. 21, 2019). It is still getting a lot of play well into the summer. The author (or rather interviewee), a certain Ed Oxford, contends that the Greek word *arsenokoitai* (literally, "men lying with a male," i.e., "men who have sex with a male") in 1 Corinthians 6:9 does not mean "homosexuals" but "molester of boys" or "pederasts."

It is one of the most badly argued attempts at discerning the meaning of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 that I have seen. This is not terribly surprising since it is not written by someone with expertise in exegeting biblical texts. Ed Oxford is identified in the article as "a gay Christian, a graduate of Talbot School of Theology." I assume that he has a masters degree, probably not a specialization in biblical studies, but at any rate certainly no scholar with a Ph.D. (evident from the quality of his argument), let alone biblical scholar.

Oxford arrives at his view on this convoluted basis: He argues that since Luther in the sixteenth century used the German word *Knabenschänder* (violators of boys, boy-abusers/molesters), also in use in a fifteenth-century Greek-German lexicon, the Greek term from the mid-first century must also be so restricted in its meaning.

That is not the way a biblical scholar thinks. Translations given at much later dates don't determine the meaning of terms at much earlier dates. The author is right that the word does not mean "homosexuals" (RSV, 1st ed.; or, for that matter, "sodomites"; "Sodom" is not part of the stem of this noun). However, he is wrong in not recognizing that the actual meaning is, in one respect, more (not less) inclusive than "homosexuals." It refers to all men who (as the active, penetrating partner) have sex with a "male" (Gk. *arsēn*) where "male" can refer to an adult or minor, irrespective (but not exclusive) of innate desires for males. In another respect it is less inclusive than "homosexuals": It is an indictment of serial-unrepentant participants in an act, not a consignment to hell simply for the mere experience of unwanted homosexual desire.

As for whether *Paul* intended to limit the word *arsenokoitai* to men who have sex with adolescent boys, consider the following:

(1) Clear connections to the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse. The compound Greek word *arsenokoitai* (*arsen-o-koi-tai*; plural of singular *arsenokoitēs*) is formed from the Greek words for "lying" (verb *keimai*; stem *kei-* adjusted to *koi-* before the "t" or letter *tau*) and "male" (*arsēn*). The word is a neologism created from terms used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Levitical prohibitions of men "lying with a male" (18:22; 20:13). (Note that the word for "lying" in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Levitical prohibitions is the noun *koitē*, also meaning "bed," which is formed from the verb *keimai*. The masculine *-tēs* suffix of the sg. noun *arsenokoitēs* denotes continuing agency or occupation, roughly equivalent to English *-er* attached to a noun; hence, "(male) liers with a male.")

That the connection to the absolute Levitical prohibitions against male-male intercourse is self-evident from the following points: (a) The rabbis used the corresponding Hebrew abstract expression *mishkav zākûr*, “lying of/with a male,” drawn from the Hebrew texts of Lev 18:22 and 20:13, to denote male-male intercourse in the broadest sense. (b) The term or its cognates does not appear in any non-Jewish, non-Christian text prior to the sixth century A.D. This way of talking about male homosexuality is a distinctly Jewish and Christian formulation. It was undoubtedly used as a way of distinguishing their absolute opposition to homosexual practice, rooted in the Torah of Moses, from more accepting views in the Greco-Roman milieu. (c) The appearance of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Tim 1:10 makes the link to the Mosaic law explicit, since the list of vices of which *arsenokoitai* is a part are said to be derived from “the law” (1:9). While it is true that the meaning of a compound word does not necessarily add up to the sum of its parts, in this instance it clearly does.

(2) The implications of the context in early Judaism. That Jews of the period construed the Levitical prohibitions of male-male intercourse absolutely and against a backdrop of a male-female requirement is beyond dispute. For example, Josephus explained to Gentile readers that “the law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman ... But it abhors the intercourse of males with males” (*Against Apion* 2.199). There are no limitations placed on the prohibition as regards age, slave status, idolatrous context, or exchange of money. The only limitation is the sex of the participants. According to *b. Sanh.* 54a (viz., tractate Sanhedrin from the Babylonian Talmud), the male with whom a man lies in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 may be “an adult or minor,” meaning that the prohibition of male-male unions is not limited to pederasty. Indeed, there is no evidence in ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or rabbinic Judaism that any limitation was placed on the prohibition of male-male intercourse.

(3) The choice of word. Had a more limited meaning been intended—for example, pederasts—the terms *paiderastai* (“lover of boys”), *paidomanai* (“men mad for boys”), or *paidophthoroi* (“corrupters of boys”) could have been chosen.

(4) The meaning of *arsenokoitai* and cognates in extant usage. The term *arsenokoitēs* and cognates after Paul (the term appears first in Paul) are applied solely to male-male intercourse but, consistent with the meaning of the partner term *malakoi*, not limited to pederasts or clients of cult prostitutes (see specifics in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 317-23). For example, the 4th century church historian Eusebius quoted from a 2nd-3rd century Christian, Bardesanes (“From the Euphrates River [eastward] ... a man who ... is derided as an *arsenokoitēs* ... will defend himself to the point of murder”), and then added that “among the Greeks, wise men who have male lovers are not condemned” (*Preparation for the Gospel* 6.10.25). Elsewhere Eusebius alluded to the prohibition of man-male intercourse in Leviticus as a prohibition not to *arsenokoitein* (lie with a male) and characterized it as a “pleasure contrary to nature,” “males mad for males,” and intercourse “of men with men” (*Demonstration of the Gospel* 1.6.33, 67; 4.10.6). Translations of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic also define the term generally as “men lying with males.”

(5) Implications of the parallel in Rom 1:24-27. It is bad exegesis to interpret the meaning of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 without consideration of the broad indictment of male-male intercourse expounded in Rom 1:27 (“males with males”). The wording of Rom 1:27 (“males, leaving behind the natural use of the female, were inflamed in their yearning for one another”) points to an inclusive rejection of all male-male relations. Paul here does not distinguish between good non-exploitative forms of male homosexual practice and bad exploitative forms but rather contrasts all male homosexual relations with natural intercourse between a man and a woman. He also emphasizes reciprocity (“yearning for one another”), a fact that rules out an indictment only of a coercive one-sided homosexual desire.

Other factors confirm the inclusive rejection of all male homosexual practice in Rom 1:27: Paul’s intertextual echo in Rom 1:23-27 to Gen 1:26-27 (which contrasts male homosexual practice with God’s intentional design in creation, “male and female [God] created them” and the consequent marital bond), his use of a nature argument (which transcends distinctions based on coercion or promiscuity), and the parallel indictment of lesbianism in Rom 1:26 (a phenomenon in the ancient world not normally manifested with slaves, call girls, or adolescents). The fact that semi-official same-sex marriages existed in the Greco-Roman world and were condemned by Greco-Roman moralists, rabbis, and Church Fathers as unnatural, despite the mutual commitment of the participants in such marriages, is another nail in the coffin for the contention that the term *arsenokoitai* had only exploitative or promiscuous male homosexual relations in view.

(6) Implications from the context of 1 Cor 5-7. This absolute and inclusive sense is further confirmed by the broader context of 1 Cor 5-7: the parallel case of incest in ch. 5 (which gives no exceptions for committed, loving unions and echoes both Levitical and Deuteronomic law); the vice list in 6:9-11 (where sexual offenders are distinguished from idolaters, consent is presumed, and a warning is given to believers not to engage in such behavior any longer); the analogy to sex with a prostitute in 6:12-20 (where Gen 2:24 is cited as the absolute norm and the Christian identity of the offender is presumed); and the issue of marriage in ch. 7 (which presumes throughout that sex is confined to male-female marriage).

(7) The relevance of 1 Cor 11:2-16. If inappropriate hairstyles or head coverings were a source of shame because they compromised the sexual differences of men and women, how much more would a man taking another man to bed be a shameful act, lying with another male “as though lying with a woman”? Paul did not make head coverings an issue vital for inclusion in God’s kingdom, but he did with same-sex intercourse.

(8) Implications of 1 Tim 1:9-10 corresponding to the Decalogue. At least the last half of the vice list in 1 Tim 1:8-10 (and possibly the whole of it) corresponds to the Decalogue. Why is that important? In early Judaism and Christianity, the Ten Commandments often served as summary headings for the full range of laws in the Old Testament. The seventh commandment against adultery, which was aimed at guarding the institution of marriage, served as a summary of all biblical sex laws, including the prohibition of male-male intercourse. The vice of kidnapping, which follows *arsenokoitai* in 1 Tim 1:10, is typically classified under the eighth commandment against stealing (so Philo, Pseudo-Phocylides, the rabbis, and the Didache; see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 335-36). This makes highly improbable the attempt by some to pair *arsenokoitai* with the following term

*andrapodistai* (kidnappers, men-stealers), as a way of limiting its reference to exploitative acts of male-male intercourse (so Robin Scroggs), rather than with the inclusive sexual term *pornoi* (the sexually immoral) that precedes it.

(9) The implication of the meaning of *malakoi*. If the term *malakoi* is not limited in its usage to boys or to men who are exploited by other men (and it is not so limited; see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 306-12), then *arsenokoitai* certainly cannot be limited to men who have sex with boys or slaves.

(10) Sex with adult males as worse than sex with adolescent boys. In the Greco-Roman world homosexual intercourse between an adult male and a male youth was regarded as a less exploitative form of same-sex *eros* than intercourse between two adult males. The key problem with homosexual intercourse—behaving toward the passive male partner as if the latter were female—was exacerbated when the intercourse was aimed at adult males who had outgrown the “softness” of immature adolescence. Consequently, even if *arsenokoitai* primarily had in mind man-boy love (and from all that we have said above, there is no evidence that it does), then, a fortiori, it would surely also take in man-man love.

(11) The weakness of “new knowledge” arguments. As already noted, people in the Greco-Roman milieu knew of, or could at least conceive of, caring, committed homosexual unions between adult males. New knowledge of a “sexual orientation” also is irrelevant, both because (a) the ancients could conceive of something akin to a sexual orientation while rejecting the behaviors that arise from them; and (b) Paul conceived of sin itself as an innate impulse, passed on by an ancestor, running through the members of the human body, and never entirely within human control. In short, that the term *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 is not restricted to adult-adolescent male sexual relationships should be viewed as a slam dunk. Ed Oxford does not address this overwhelming case. I see no evidence that he is even aware of the arguments. Apparently his “discovery” about 1 Cor 6:9 became the catalyst for a book that will be released in 2020, co-authored with Kathy Baldock, entitled *Forging a Sacred Weapon: How the Bible Became Anti-Gay*. Based on what I have seen thus far in their foundation story, we should expect this book (self-published or published with a vanity press?) to be a tendentious and uninformed work that tells us more about what they wished Jesus and the writers of Scripture had said rather than what they actually said.

To my knowledge, Kathy Baldock has even less training in biblical scholarship than Ed Oxford; but she is twice as caustic. I know several people who have felt stalked by her online and at events. In [one post](#) she arrogantly upbraids persons with an orthodox perspective on homosexual practice (here J. D. Greear's Summit Church): “If you follow my work at all, you will know that I know a lot about the historical context of [1 Cor 6:9] and how it has changed over time. You will also know the verse is not addressing those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. . . . *Please educate yourselves* before you impose lazy, sloppy theology on the life of another” (Baldock’s emphases). I can think of no better way to end this post than to reaffirm Baldock’s last sentence, only applied to her and to Ed.