

## Redefining Leviticus 20:13

By [June Kozak Kane](#) December 2, 2011, 5:00 am

What did [Leviticus 20:13](#) really intend, and when did it intend it?

Arguably, [Leviticus 20:13](#) may have been initiated to address the threat of a specific ancient Greek pederastic practice and was not originally intended as an outright ban on male homosexuality. That interpretation may have come later, in response to the harsh anti-homosexual laws enacted in 324 C.E. by Emperor Constantine, and rabbis may actually have chosen a necessary shift in the former interpretation to protect Jewish homosexuals from death sentences.

It is possible, therefore, that we as a society have not focused sufficiently on pederasty as an outrage, because strange twists of history sent us in a different direction. With pederasty very much in the news currently, because of the Penn State scandal especially but not exclusively, it is worth examining

Looking at the precise Hebrew words in [Leviticus 20:13](#), it is fascinating to note what we actually see and what is not there. What the text prohibits is a sexual relationship between a “man” (ish in Hebrew) and a male (zachar in Hebrew), not between an “ish” and another “ish.”

This may sound like quibbling, but where the Torah is concerned, every word counts. Nowhere here do we find the Torah referring to a “female” in discussing forbidden relations; it is “man>woman” in every instance. Only here does the text digress and use “man>male” rather than “man>man,” which is how we have been taught to read the text.

So why is this particular word “male” used in this verse? Is it possible that this is not a prohibition against male homosexuality after all, but rather of pederasty?

This is not a stretch of the imagination. Ancient Greek culture suggests just such a possibility. In that world, there was a popular and common social custom of men of a certain class socializing with younger males – in a context where mentoring, socializing, partying, and sexual activities would or could occur between the two groups.

These specific words – “men” and “males” – were used precisely in descriptions of the Greek custom back then because, at that time, only men who were of adult age and of sufficient substance to own land, vote, and marry, could legally be called “men.” Those who were too young to vote, own land, or marry could only be referred to as “males” under Greek law.

It is even possible that the term “men with males” was a well understood phrase – perhaps even being idiomatic and axiomatic at the time.

If man>male is a specific term referring to Greek pederasty, then its use in [Leviticus 20:13](#) would make that verse a prohibition of that practice and not of homosexuality in general. That

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would also mean that there is no such condemnation anywhere else in the Torah ([Leviticus 18:22](#) also uses the word zachar, rather than ish).

The use of “man” and “male” here so precisely mirrors the Greek terminology that another inference can be drawn, as well—that pederasty was an abhorrent alien practice not common to Israel. If it had been a common Israelite custom, a distinctly Hebrew word for “young boy,” such as bachur or yeled, would have been used in the text, rather than “zachor” (“male”).

Similarly, if the verse was meant to refer to adult homosexual behavior, the style of usage in both [Leviticus 20](#) and the earlier [Leviticus 18](#) would require that ish>ish be used, not ish>zachar. The fact that “isha” (woman) is used in both Leviticus verses adds to this. “An ish should not lie with a zachar as he would with an isha” makes less contextual sense than “an ish should not lie with an ish as he would with an isha.” Only if zachar has a specific meaning does its use here make sense. Absent such a specific meaning in Hebrew usage (other than to mean “male” in general), the specific meaning we do find is its Greek meaning – that is, that “man>male” signifies a pederastic relationship and it is this that the Leviticus verses outlaw.

As for how the verse got reinterpreted in response to Constantine’s harsh legislation, that is beyond the scope of the space allotted to this article. Suffice it to say that when homosexual behavior is made subject to the death penalty, it would make perfect sense for rabbinic authorities to seek Torah-based ways of discouraging such behavior in order to discourage Jewish men from incurring such a final penalty.

Does this mean that the Torah (or Jewish law) does not object to homosexual behavior per se? No, it does not. It does mean, however, that there is no verse in the original Hebrew to support such an objection.

Pederasty is an evil that has received all too short a shrift from rabbis for centuries. Re-examining (and perhaps restoring) the meaning of [Leviticus 20:13](#) and 18:22 should push this evil high on the list of practices to condemn and despise.