

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

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Israel's Holiness Code

The chapters that contain these verses are clearly identified as speaking against practices involved in cultic idol worship. The entire passages are generally accepted as not applying to modern Christian life.

These two verses in Leviticus read as follows in the King James Version:

“Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is an abomination.” (Leviticus 18:22)

“If a man also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood be upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13)

Before delving into these two verses, it would be helpful to read [How Language is Interpreted](#), which is part of the discussion of Romans 1.

If we wish to understand the true meaning of these verses, we must look at their context, both textual and historical. Until we understand what prompted these rules in Old Testament times, we will not be able to determine if the rules should be applied to the case of two people in committed, loving relationship.

The text itself gives us a big clue as to the intended meaning. Three different times we are specifically told that the rules set forth in chapters 18 and 20 are meant to prevent the Israelites from doing what the Egyptians and Canaanites did. The term Canaanites refers to the group of nations who lived in the land into which the Israelites migrated when they left Egypt. It follows, therefore, if we can determine what type of homosexual behavior was common among the Canaanites and Egyptians, we will better understand what these verses were meant to prohibit.

Biblical historians tell us the Canaanite religions surrounding the Israelites at the time of Leviticus often included fertility rites consisting of sexual rituals. These rituals were thought to bring the blessing of the god or goddess on crop and livestock production. During the rituals, whole families, including husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, cousins, aunts and uncles would sometimes have sex. Also included was sex with temple prostitutes. In short, every kind of sexual practice imaginable was performed at these rituals, including homosexual sex.

Consider one specific example. Historians tell us that many Canaanites and Egyptians worshipped a goddess of love and fertility called Astarte or Ishtar. Within her temples were special priests called *assinu*, who were deemed to have special powers. Physical contact with the *assinu* was believed to ward off evil and promote good luck. These priests were, in effect, living good luck charms, and worshipers would often ritually touch them as part of their worship practices. Sexual intercourse was considered especially effective for gaining the goddess's favor, because the male worshiper was offering his greatest possession, semen (which was thought to be the essence of life), to the goddess through her priests. Depositing semen in the body of a priest of the goddess was believed to guarantee one's immortality. Similar cultic sexual practices flourished in connection with many other ancient pagan deities.

This is what was going on in Canaan and Egypt at the time the Levitical rules were announced — homosexual temple prostitution. And as already noted, Leviticus 18 and 20 specifically say they were written to address pagan religious practices. Leviticus 18 begins with the admonition, "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you." (18:3) Chapter 20 is even more specific, beginning with an injunction against the pagan practices associated with a god named Molech. And both chapters include long lists of sexual practices common in the cultic rituals we mentioned above. However, neither of them speaks to the question of whether two people of the same sex can live in loving relationship with the blessing of God.

In fact, historians tell us our model of loving, long-term homosexual relationships did not meaningfully exist in Canaanite culture. This was a tribal culture in which it would have been virtually impossible to form such relationships. Offspring were essential to survival in this primitive agricultural economy. Moreover, there were rigid distinctions between women's work and men's work. If two men had lived together as a couple, for example, one of them would have been placed in the position of doing women's work, and the presence of a man working among the women of the village would not have been tolerated.

It simply is not reasonable to believe the author of Leviticus intended to prohibit a form of homosexual relationship that did not exist at the time. When read in textual and historical context, the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 are clearly directed at homosexual temple prostitution, and that is how they should be applied.

Some people may object, saying, "But if you ignore the context and just read the words of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in black and white, they appear to prohibit all sex between

men, not just sex in pagan rituals.” But that is the whole point: The meaning of words depends on context. Remember, the words of 1 Corinthians 11 also appear to require long hair and head coverings for all women in all circumstances. But, because we have studied the context, we know that is not what was meant. A text taken out of context is pretext. Let’s apply the same common-sense rule here.

The Leviticus passages were clearly written in the context of pagan religious ritual. Since we are not bringing a question about the appropriateness of cultic sex practices for modern Christians, we can safely set aside these clobber passages.