



UNITED METHODIST

INSIGHT

Discerning God's Will for the Future

Has 'Homosexual' Always Been in the Bible?

by [The Forge Online](#)

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Some of scholar Ed Oxford's early Bible translations. (The Forge Online Photo; reprinted with permission)

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The word “arsenokoitai” shows up in two different verses in the bible, but it was not translated to mean “homosexual” until 1946.

We got to sit down with Ed Oxford at his home in Long Beach, California and talk about this question.

You have been part of a research team that is seeking to understand how the decision was made to put the word homosexual in the bible. Is that true?

Ed: Yes. It first showed up in the RSV translation. So before figuring out why they decided to use that word in the RSV translation (which is outlined in my upcoming book with Kathy Baldock, *Forging a Sacred Weapon: How the Bible Became Anti-Gay*) I wanted to see how other cultures and translations treated the same verses when they were translated during the Reformation 500 years ago. So I started collecting old Bibles in French, German, Irish, Gaelic, Czechoslovakian, Polish... you name it. Now I've got most European major languages that I've collected over time. Anyway, I had a German friend come back to town and I asked if he could help me with some passages in one of my German Bibles from the 1800s. So we went to Leviticus 18:22 and he's translating it for me word for word. In the English where it says "Man shall not lie with man, for it is an abomination," the German version says "Man shall not lie with young boys as he does with a woman, for it is an abomination." I said, "What?! Are you sure?" He said, "Yes!" Then we went to Leviticus 20:13— same thing, "Young boys." So we went to 1 Corinthians to see how they translated arsenokoitai (original Greek word) and instead of homosexuals it said, "Boy molesters will not inherit the kingdom of God."

I then grabbed my facsimile copy of Martin Luther's original German translation from 1534. My friend is reading through it for me and he says, "Ed, this says the same thing!" They use the word *knabenschänder*. *Knaben* is boy, *schänder* is molester. This word "boy molesters" for the most part carried through the next several centuries of German Bible translations. *Knabenschänder* is also in 1 Timothy 1:10. So the interesting thing is, I asked if they ever changed the word *arsenokoitai* to homosexual in modern translations. So my friend found it and told me, "The first time homosexual appears in a German translation is 1983." To me that was a little suspect because of what was happening in culture in the 1970s. Also because the Germans were the ones who created the word homosexual in 1862, they had all the history, research, and understanding to change it if they saw fit; however, they did not change it until 1983. If anyone was going to put the word homosexual in the Bible, the Germans should have been the first to do it!



A German translation of the Bible showing the word "knabenschänder" meaning "molester of boys." (The Forge Online Photo; used by permission).

As I was talking with my friend I said, "I wonder why not until 1983? Was their influence from America?" So we had our German connection look into it again and it turns out that the company, *Biblica*, who owns the NIV version, paid for this 1983 German version. Thus it was Americans who paid for it! In 1983 Germany didn't have enough of a Christian population to warrant the cost of a new Bible translation, because it's not cheap. So an American company paid for it and influenced the decision, resulting in the word homosexual entering the German Bible for the first time in history. So, I say, I think there is a "gay agenda" after all!

I also have a 1674 Swedish translation and an 1830 Norwegian translation of the Bible. I asked one of my friends, who was attending Fuller seminary and is fluent in both Swedish and Norwegian, to look at these verses for me. So we met at a coffee shop in Pasadena with my old Bibles. (She didn't really know why I was asking.) Just like reading an old English Bible, it's not easy to read. The letters are a little bit funky, the spelling is a little bit different. So she's going through it carefully, and then her face comes up, "Do you know what this says?!" and I said, "No! That's why you are here!" She said, "It says boy abusers, boy molesters." It turns out that the ancient world condoned and encouraged a system whereby young boys (8-12 years old) were coupled by older men. Ancient Greek documents show us how even parents utilized this abusive system to help their sons advance in society. So for most of history, most translations thought these verses were obviously referring the pederasty, not homosexuality!

So then I started thinking that of 4 of the 6 clobber passages, all these nations and translations were referring to pederasty, and not what we would call homosexuality today.

Q: How did the translation teams work?

Well, they didn't operate out of a vacuum when they translated something. They used data available to them from very old libraries. Last week at the Huntington Library I found a Lexicon from 1483. I looked up arsenokoitai and it gave the Latin equivalent, paedico and praedico. If you look those up they means pederasty, or knabenschander, (boy molester, in German.) 1483 is the year Martin Luther was born, so when he was running for his life translating the Bible and carrying his books, he would have used such a Lexicon. It was the Lexicon of his time. This Lexicon would have used information from the previous 1000+ years, including data passed down from the Church Fathers.

So there is historical tradition to show that these verses aren't relating to homosexuality?

Absolutely! Sometimes I'm frustrated when speak with pastors who say, "Well I believe the historical tradition surrounding these verses" and then proceed with a condemnation of LGBTQ individuals. I challenge them to see what was actually traditionally taught. For most of history, most European Bibles taught the tradition that these 4 verses were dealing with pederasty, not homosexuality. I am saddened when I see pastors and theologians cast aside the previous 2000 years of history. This is why I collect very old Bibles, lexicons, theological books and commentaries - most modern biblical commentaries adjusted to accommodate this mistranslation. It's time for the truth to come out!

Yes! My brother, who is a pastor, also told me the same thing: that every sector of the church has seen same-sex relationships as sinful for 2,000 years. But the more i read and study though, the more i just don't see this being true.

What was used before homosexual showed up in the RSV version?

King James Version triumphed the land and they used the phrase, "Abusers of themselves with mankind" for arsenokoitai. If you asked people during that time no one really wanted to tackle it. So that's why I'm collecting Bibles, Biblical commentaries and lexicons, in order to show how theologians dealt with these passages.

Q: In your opinion, how would the church be different if the RSV didn't change *arsenkoitai* and *malakoi* to homosexual in 1946?

In my opinion, if the RSV did not use the word homosexual in first Corinthians 6:9, and instead would have spent years in proper research to understand homosexuality and to really dig into the historical contextualization, I think translators would have ended up with a more accurate translation of the abusive nature intended by this word. I think we could have avoided the horrible damage that was done from pulpits all across America, and ultimately other parts of the world. But let's don't throw out the baby with the bathwater — the RSV team did a great job on most everything else. It was an honest mistake.

Q: And do you think your life would have gone differently as a result?

Yes, absolutely! I think my life would have been starkly different if the translation would have been translated with the accurate historical contextualization - especially within my own family, since they rely so heavily on the English translation and put a lot of faith in the translators for the final product in English. Since most people haven't studied Greek or Hebrew, they have no concept of challenging a translation, and any potential errors that may have occurred during translation. Therefore, many people are unable to consider the implications of the text beyond the English translation in front of them.

Q: Based on your research, what advice would you have for LGBTQ Christians today?

My advice to LGBTQ Christians today would be three things:

- 1.) As difficult as it may be, try to extend grace and patience to the Church. The vast majority of pastors in America have not done their due diligence on this topic, so we can't expect them to be any further along than they are currently. In the same way that God has extended grace and patience with us when we sin, we need to extend grace and patience toward others regarding their error on this topic. Bitterness will only manage to create further damage.
- 2.) Seek out other LGBTQ Christians who have already done their due diligence on this topic and reached a point of peace between their sexuality and God. We can learn a lot from others who are a little further up the trail.
- 3.) Often remind yourself that this mess is not caused by God, but instead is the result of people who have been entrusted with free will.