

Creating a New Version of Leviticus to Support Homosexuality

What do you do when the biblical text is against your position, explicitly so? What do you do when not one single verse supports your viewpoint? It's simple. You create new verses out of thin air. You rewrite the Bible to your liking. That's exactly what biblical scholar Idan Dershowitz has done.

In his *New York Times* op-ed piece, Dr. Dershowitz summarizes his 2017 academic article published in the journal *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*. (Is it any surprise that the *Times* decided to publish his piece?)

Dr. Dershowitz claims that, "Before Leviticus was composed, outright prohibitions against homosexual sex—whether between men or women—were practically unheard-of in the ancient world." And he believes that Leviticus was "created gradually over a long period and includes the words of more than one writer."

He then argues that "an earlier edition of Leviticus... may have been silent on the matter of sex between men." (Note carefully: He means a non-existent edition of Leviticus. A Leviticus that is the figment of his own imagination. A Leviticus without a shred of textual, manuscript support in any ancient language at any period of time.)

Not only so, but Dr. Dershowitz even claims that, "there is good evidence that an earlier version of the laws in Leviticus 18 permitted sex between men."

As someone trained in the same scholarly field as Dr. Dershowitz, I can say without equivocation that this is nothing more than scholarly fabrication and should be rejected

as complete and utter nonsense.

Let's remember that: 1) there is not one positive word in the Bible about homosexual practice; 2) every reference to homosexual practice in the Bible is categorically negative; and 3) every scriptural example of marriage and family is heterosexual.

How then does Dr. Dershowitz come to such outrageous conclusions?

He first observes that in the ancient Near Eastern world, "outright prohibitions against homosexual sex—whether between men or women—were practically unheard-of."

Though it is true that such prohibitions are largely lacking in the surrounding, ancient world, there are some laws that prescribe harsh punishment for certain acts of male sodomy. So, this is an overstatement.

More importantly, it appears that homosexual acts were part of ancient Near Eastern idolatrous culture—in other words, part and parcel of the pagan culture which the Bible condemns. No wonder, then, that more emphasis was not put on prohibiting these acts. In fact, Leviticus confirms this, stating that sinful acts like these were widely practiced in the surrounding, ancient world. Israel was not to follow their example. (See Leviticus 18:1-3, 24-30.)

But that is not the heart of Dr. Dershowitz's argument.

Using a "little detective work," he claims to have discovered that the alleged "original" text of Leviticus 18 only forbade homosexual incest. All other homosexual acts were permitted.

Not only is this argument entirely without textual support (something that needs to be repeated over and over again), but it makes for the bizarre idea that, in ancient Israel, men could have sex with as many men as they desired, without penalty, so

long as they were not close blood relatives. Yet they could only have sex with the woman (or, women) they were married to, and at that, with certain purity guidelines.

According to Dershowitz, being gay in ancient Israel made for quite the party life, and with God's alleged sanction, at that.

What, then, is the "discovery" that Dr. Dershowitz has made to support this claim?

He argues that in Leviticus 18:7 and 18:14, the specific wording of the Hebrew text masks the fact that, originally, the verses outlawed sex between a man and his father or mother (v. 7) and between a man and his uncle (v. 14). In the current version of Leviticus (again, the one and only version we have), he writes, "A law prohibiting sex with one's father fades away, and a law against sex with one's uncle is reinterpreted as a ban on sex with one's aunt."

As for Leviticus 18:22, which explicitly prohibits sex between two men (see also Leviticus 20:13), that was allegedly added at a later time in Israelite history. As, Dr. Dershowitz writes, "In addition to having the prohibition against same-sex relations added to it, the earlier text, I believe, was revised in an attempt to obscure any implication that same-sex relations had once been permissible."

Of course, same-sex relations had never been permissible in ancient Israel (to say it once more, there is zero evidence to support the opposite position), while the two verses cited by Dr. Dershowitz do not support his thesis.

To respond briefly:

1) Because all homosexual relations were forbidden, there was no reason to forbid specific homosexual acts.

2) In contrast, because many heterosexual relations were

permissible, it was important to single out which ones were forbidden, which is what Leviticus 18 does.

3) Leviticus 18:7 and 14 forbid sleeping with the wife of your father or the wife of your father's brother, acts which would also directly shame one's father. As rendered in the New Jewish Publication Society Version, respectively, "Your father's nakedness, that is, the nakedness of your mother, you shall not uncover; she is your mother—you shall not uncover her nakedness." And, "Do not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother: do not approach his wife; she is your aunt."

4) There is no textual evidence—not the slightest linguistic clue of any kind—that Leviticus 18:22 was added later to this chapter.

5) What we call "the Bible" today is based on the texts that we have—in other words, the Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek texts that have been passed down through the generations. It is not based on some reconstructed texts created out of thin air.

That means for all those who hold these texts to be God's Word, the matter has long been settled: Homosexual practice is forbidden by God, but there is the possibility of forgiveness, redemption and new life for all who put their trust in the Redeemer.

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