

How did Leviticus Get to Be So Popular?

When writers in the secular press try to explain why many Christians oppose gay marriage or the ordination of practicing homosexuals, they often cite Leviticus 20:13, which declares “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.” If that passage is, indeed, the basis for believers’ objections to homosexual acts, their position is easy to dismiss, since Leviticus also bans trimming one’s hair, wearing cloth made of two different fibers, and eating shrimp.

Citing Leviticus has been an effective rhetorical move for columnists in the *New York Times* and other papers because it paints Christian opponents of homosexuality as both silly and hypocritical since they don’t want to apply the other Levitical laws and give up their buzz-cuts, pork rinds, and crab legs. It has also been the basis for a tour-de-force speech by the Martin Sheen character on *The West Wing* and a widely circulated e-mail based on it. After a version of radio’s Dr. Laura explains that Leviticus condemns homosexuality, President Bartlett slaps her down with a series of questions including, “Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football?”

The only problem is that most Christians don’t care all that much about Leviticus. Their views on marriage and sexuality are based on the New Testament and the words of Jesus and Paul.

It has become a truism that Jesus says nothing about homosexuality. And he doesn’t directly. (Little wonder in that: “homosexuality” as an “orientation,” rather than a set of acts, was not described until the nineteenth century.) What he does is forcefully condemn fornication (Matthew 15:20; Mark 7:21) and describe marriage as based on God’s original creation of humankind as male as female (Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12.) If fornication (sex outside

marriage) is out and marriage is rooted in the two sexes, there is no room for homosexual acts. And that is Jesus talking. If he's wrong about sex, Christians are going to have a hard time claiming he is one of the persons of the all-knowing God. (And, tempting as it is to blame killjoy evangelists for foisting these grim texts on a sex-loving Jesus, they are not disputed except by those who suggest that Jesus didn't utter almost all his recorded words.)

Christians will also look to St. Paul's letters when thinking about homosexuality. He—or a disciple writing in his name—condemns it over and over, linking sodomites with sinners such as slave-traders (Rom 1:24-27; 1 Timothy 8:11). Leviticus, on the other hand, lays down rules on slavery, which is another reason it is hard to cite as an authoritative text on other matters. There have, indeed, been attempts to reinterpret the New Testament texts on marriage and sodomy in such a way as to make them suit contemporary ideas of sexual morality, but those are usually quite strained.

Non-Christians may think that looking to any ancient scripture for guidance is equally silly. But they still might want to present Christians' views honestly, instead of in parody. And Christians who want to embrace the secular culture's values might want to think about whether they can say that Jesus got it wrong on homosexuality, fornication, and marriage, and still claim that he is who they say he is.

2004

Brian Abel Ragen taught Introduction to the Bible for many years at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where he is Professor of English. Ragen retains copyright to this essay. He can be contacted at inquiries@brianableragen.net.