

Seven Myths in the Homophobic Translations of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

9 Do you not know that the **unjust [oppressors, *adikoi*]** will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor **softies/cowards [*malakoi*, soft males]**, nor males who sexually abuse other males [*arsenokoitai*, male/s + bed/s], **10** nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. **11** And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (**1 Cor 6:9-11**)

9 Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, **10** for the sexually immoral/adulterers, and **males who sexually abuse other males [*arsenokoitai*, male/s + bed/s]**, for **slave traders**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching (**1 Tim 1:9-10**).

1 Cor 6:9: *malakoi* (“soft”) + *'arsenokoítai* (“bed-males”) **1 Tim 1:10:** *'arsenokoítai* (“bed-males”)

effeminate...abusers of themselves with mankind (AV/KJV)

homosexuals (RSV 1952)

the self-indulgent...sodomites (NJB)

male prostitutes...homosexual offenders (NIV)

male prostitutes...sodomites (NRSV)

male prostitutes...practice homosexuality (NLT)

men who practice homosexuality (ESV)

defile themselves with mankind (AV/KJV)

sodomites (RSV 1952)

homosexuals (NJB)

perverts (NIV)

sodomites (NRSV)

practice homosexuality (NLT)

men who practice homosexuality (ESV)

MYTH 1 *In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 Paul condemns lesbians.* The Greek term “bed-males” is explicitly limited to males, while *malakoí*, “soft” in Mat 11:8 // Luke 7:25 refers to clothes and at times was used as a metaphor for *males* who were undisciplined or “effeminate.” However, in antiquity “effeminate” could be used to describe an undisciplined male who had frequent sexual relations with women or who spent too much time in their company (see David, seeking out Bathsheba instead of leading his troops in war). Moreover, throughout church history, until quite recently, *malakoí* has been misinterpreted as condemning masturbation (Martin 1996:117-136; Fredrickson 2000: 197, 218-222; Danker BDAG 2000:135). Neither the Hebrew Bible (the “Old Testament”), nor the New Testament, nor the Koran make any reference to sexual relations between women (“lesbianism”). Romans 1:26 does not refer to lesbians but to females who offer themselves to males “against nature,” that is, for anal sex, in order to avoid pregnancy (Hanks 2006:591-93).

MYTH 2 *In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 Paul condemns “homosexuals.”* The approval of masturbation and the invention of a new “mental illness” (homosexuality) by 19th century psychologists, together with the sudden disappearance of the sin of “sodomy” in the 20th century biblical studies motivated a desperate search for new texts to condemn homosexuality (48 texts in the Hebrew Bible referred to Sodom, but as a city, not a sin). Therefore, beginning with the Revised Standard Version (RSV NT in 1946; Bible in 1952) and soon supported by the standard Greek lexicon (BAG, 1957), biblicists everywhere began to introduce “homosexuals” as the translation of *malakoi* + *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor 6:9 and of *arsenokoitai* [without *malakoi*] in 1 Tim 1:9. Thus, with an incredible anachronism, two Greek words (*malakoi*, “soft” males + *'arsenokoítai*, “bed-males”, from *koíte*, “bed”, a euphemism for sexual intercourse, and *'arsen*, male[s]) acquired a new sense and frequently were mistranslated with the modern scientific term “homosexuals.” Finally, however, in the new edition of the standard Greek lexicon (now BDAG), editor and reviser Frederick Danker recognized the grave error of the previous edition and of the RSV in proposing “homosexuals” as the translation of *arsenokoitai* with or without *malakoi* (2000:135 and 613). Nevertheless, precisely when the newer versions in English began to correct the erroneous translation “homosexuals,” translators began to introduce the term “homosexuales” in the Spanish versions (in Spanish see DHH, BJ, NVI; NTLH; cf. RV95 “sodomites”; BP “inverts”).

Although *'arsenokoítai* is a rare word (perhaps coined by Paul), whose precise meaning has been disputed for centuries, it is formed from two very common words: male(s) + bed. In this term “bed” is not literal but has a metaphorical sense indicating some kind of sexual activity (see the negative use of the word “beds” in Romans 13:13 (to signify acts of adultery, promiscuity) and compare the positive reference to the marriage “bed” in Hebrews 13:4). In the vice list in 1 Tim (1:9-10), the Seventh of the Ten Commandments, the prohibition of adultery, appears as the prohibition of prostitution /unjust sexual relations (Greek: *pórnois*) and also of “bed-male[s]”. This occurrence of “bed-male[s]” in 1 Tim 1:10 enables us to define the meaning more precisely, since it occurs between a reference to sexual relations that are unjust and oppressive (Greek: *pórnois*) and another term that refers to “slave traders.” Thus, according to the most recent studies, *arsenokoítai* appears to signify sexual relations that are *abusive* (male-male rape without condoms) in contexts of exploitation and oppression, and related to the purchase or kidnapping of youths to be slaves, working as male prostitutes (Martin 1996; 2006; Harrill 1999; Elliott 2004; see Danker BDAG 2000:613 on *malakoi*).

The translation of *arsenokoitai* (“bed-males,” with or without *malakoi*, “softies”) as “homosexuals” is totally erroneous, since :

- “homosexual” includes women (lesbians) and “bed-males” is explicitly limited to males;
- “homosexual” is a German word invented in 1869 (in Austria) to designate a person’s “sexual *orientation*” (a modern scientific concept), while “bed-males” refers only to sexual *acts* in which a male sexually abuses another male (whatever the sexual orientation of the two males involved);
- “homosexual” does not specifically indicate any sexual *practice*: males and females, heterosexuals and bisexuals, also may engage in slave traffic and resort to male prostitutes, condemned in 1 Tim as vices. However, many persons of homosexual orientation abstain from all sexual activity, especially the prostitution and sexual abuse of young slaves condemned in 1 Tim 1:10.

MYTH 3 According to 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 homosexuality is an abomination, the gravest sin. The absence of the terms “soft/effeminate” and “bed-male/s” in the two preceding lists (1 Cor 5:10 and 11; see Gal 5:19-20 and NJB note Rom 1:29) suggests that these two terms in the list of ten vices (1 Cor 6:9-10) do not have the same importance as those vices repeated in the other lists (John Elliott 2004:21; see sexual immorality, 1 Cor 5; 6:12-20; coveting, 1 Cor 6:1-11; idolatry in 1 Cor 8:1-11:1):

1 Cor 5:10 (masc. plural)	1 Cor 5:11 (masc. singular)	1 Cor 6:9-10 (masculine plural)
<i>pornois</i> (prostitutes/immoral)	<i>pornos</i>	<i>pornois</i>
covetous/greedy	covetous/greedy	<i>idolaters</i>
robbers	<i>idolater</i>	adulterers
<i>idolaters</i>	reviler	<i>malakoi</i> (suaves)
	drunkard	<i>arsenokoitai</i> (bed-males)
	robber	thieves
		drunkards
		revilers
		robbers

The situation is similar to the prohibitions of male-male anal sex (abusive, incestuous?) in Lev 18:22 and 20:13, which only occur in this latest of the Pentateuchal legal codes (the Holiness Code, Lev 17-26), but which are absent in the earlier codes (the Book of the Covenant, Ex 21-23; Deuteronomy).

MYTH 4 In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 Paul condemns all homoerotic acts as immoral. The terms “im/moral” and “ethical” never occur in the Bible, since they are categories of Greek philosophy. In 1 Cor 6:9 Paul treats sexual acts and passions under the category of “injustice/oppression (*adikia*)” (cf the “unjust judges” in 6:1 and → Rom 1:18, 29; 2:8). In 1 Tim 1:9-10 the “bed-males” sexually abuse enslaved youths. Since the

Kingdom of God is characterized above all by divine liberating justice (Mat 5:6, 10, 20; 6:10, 33; 25:31-46), the unjust/oppressors cannot enter (1 Cor 6:9).

That the condemnation in 1 Cor 6:9 of male-male anal sex is not general or universal, but rather limited to certain sexual acts of exploitation, sexual abuse, etc., is indicated by five factors:

- A reference to the *unjust/oppressors* (*adikoi* 6:9) initiates the vice-list, indicating that all the terms that follow are examples of such abuse of power to oppress and exploit persons who are socially weaker;
- In the only other use of *arsenokoitai* in the NT (the vice-list in 1 Tim 1:9), the term is preceded by a reference to males who use prostitutes and followed by a reference to “slave traders,” which indicates that the *arsenokoitai* are the clients of the young male prostitutes who had been kidnapped and kept as slaves (acts of exploitation and oppression);
- In Paul’s patriarchal historical-cultural context, sexual acts were understood to be relations between an active, superior penetrator (free male) and a passive, penetrated inferior (female, youth, slave), not as expressions of mutual committed love between social equals (as Garland recognizes, 2003:214, 217-218, citing Halperin, Dover and others; see *adikia*, injustice/oppression, in Rom 1:18-2:16);
- The reference to the *idolatry* of the oppressors (1 Cor 6:9) also constitutes the context of the unjust acts condemned in Lev 18 and 20 and Rom 1:18-23, 25.
- The earliest uses of *arsenokoitai* after Paul (who may have coined the word) occur in contexts of sins of economic injustice and exploitation, not of sexual sins (Dale Martin 1996:120-123).

MYTH 5 In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 Paul condemns all acts of male-male sexual love. In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 Paul never speaks of love and what he condemns is *injustice/oppression* expressed in male-male anal sex acts, where coveting motivates the exploitation that harms the neighbor, especially the weak, slaves, youths, and prostitutes (Elliott 2004:29; Thiselton 2006:91; David Frederickson translates “those who lack self-control...the arrogant who penetrate boys,” 2000:197, 218-222). Notably 1 Corinthians is the New Testament book that most treats human sexuality (1 Cor 5-7) and that most emphasizes the preeminence of love (1 Cor 13), but when writing about sex, Paul never explicitly refers to love (1 Cor 5-7) and when expounding about love, he never says anything explicit about sexuality (1 Cor 13; but see 16:14).

MYTH 6 In 1 Cor 6:9 Paul indicates that certain individuals had ceased being homosexual. In 1 Cor 6:9 Paul does not refer to “homosexuals” (persons of a certain sexual orientation), but of male-male sexual acts characterized by injustice/oppression and exploitation. When the Apostle refers to the transformation of such persons (“and such *were* some of you,” 6:11), he indicates that they had ceased practicing such acts of injustice/oppression and sexual exploitation, not of having changed their sexual orientation, which according to modern psychology is as impossible as changing the preference of handedness (cease being left-handed) or of eye color (from blue to brown). Leaders and counselors in the so-called “ExGay” ministries, who claim such results are self-deceived, prisoners of fundamentalist ideologies, or quacks. Hence they have been condemned by associations of authentic scientists, since often such “ExGay” therapies eventually result in depression, addictions, divorces and suicides.

MYTH 7 In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 Paul demonstrates a scientific comprehension of homosexuality that surpasses that of modern unbelieving scientists (who support the “gay agenda”). The vice-lists in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 make no claims to any scientific comprehension of human sexuality (nor of alcoholism; see “drunkards,” 1 Cor 1:10), but rather utilize traditional vice-lists to denounce acts of injustice/oppression that (1) harm the neighbor (Rom 13:8-10) and (2) destroy Christian communities (1 Cor 12-14). The notion of a “gay agenda” is another myth created by homophobic propaganda, which ignores the incredible diversity of the gay population (not a “community”), where many are pacifists, while others seek to serve openly in the military, some seek the right to traditional marriage, while others (like many heterosexuals) seek to subvert/transform traditional forms of marriage. It is as absurd to speak of a single “gay agenda” as it would be to refer to some sinister “heterosexual agenda.”

Excursus: 1 Cor 6:9 in Garland, David E. (2003). *1 Corinthians*. ECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 211-218.

Traslation (p. 194): *malakoi* [soft] = “males who are penetrated sexually by males”

+ *arsenokoitai* [male/s + bed/s] = “males who sexually penetrate males”

The translation of David Garland, a conservative evangelical Baptist scholar, in effect recognizes that “homosexuals” is not a correct translation of the Greek terms in 1 Cor 6:9 (and 1 Tim 1:10), since

(1) *arsenokoitai* does not refer to women/lesbians, but only and explicitly to males;

(2) the terms do not refer to sexual orientations, but to a sexual act (male-male anal penetration), which males of any sexual orientation might do (active) or permit (passive); and

(3) the terms do not describe just any kind of male-male sexual relations, but only to anal penetration in which one partner is active and the other passive.

Garland recognizes that Paul’s use of *malakoi* + *arsenokoitai* probably derives from the LXX (Greek) translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (2003:212-213). Saul Olyan has demonstrated that Lev 18:22 and 20:13 refer only to males in acts of anal penetration and hence does not condemn sexual acts involving only mutual masturbation, oral sex or intercrural sex. If in 1 Cor 6:9 *arsenokoitai* [male/s + bed/s] refers only to the penetrator, we cannot interpret 1 Tim 1:9, which has only *arsenokoitai*, without *malakoi*, condemns also the penetrated male (a kidnapped youth enslaved, probably forced into prostituion).

The only question where no consensus yet exists, therefore, is whether Paul intends to condemn all acts of male-male anal sex. (Garland, Thistleton, Gagnon), or if the context suggests some limitation (Boswell, Scroggs, Martin, Elliott).

That the condemnation of male-male anal sex in 1 Cor 6:9 is not universal, but limited to unjust acts (exploitation, sexual abuse of youths, slaves, prostitutes, etc.) is indicated by five factors:

- A reference to the *unjust/oppresers* (*adikoi* 6:9) initiates the vice-list, indicating that all the terms that follow are examples of such abuse of power to oppress and exploit persons who are socially weaker;
- In the only other use of *arsenokoitai* in the NT (the vice-list in 1 Tim 1:9), the term is preceded by a reference to males who use prostitutes and followed by a reference to “slave traders,” which indicates that the *arsenokoitai* are the clients of the young male prostitutes who had been kidnapped and kept as slaves (acts of exploitation and oppression);
- In Paul’s patriarchal historical-cultural context, sexual acts were understood to be relations between an active, superior penetrator (free male) and a passive, penetrated inferior (female, youth, slave), not as expressions of mutual committed love between social equals (as Garland recognizes, 2003:214, 217-218, citing Halperin, Dover and others; see *adikia*, injustice/oppression, in Rom 1:18-2:16);
- The reference to the *idolatry* of the oppressors (1 Cor 6:9) also constitutes the context of the unjust acts condemned in Lev 18 and 20 and Rom 1:18-23, 25.
- The earliest uses of *arsenokoitai* after Paul (who may have coined the word) occur in contexts of sins of economic injustice and exploitation, not of sexual sins (Dale Martin 1996:120-123).

Therefore, Garland’s ideological prejudice is plain when he concludes that 1 Cor 6:9 constitutes a universal condemnation of “every kind of homosexual intercourse”, which he then suggests would be “good news to any slaves who were subject to unwanted sexual advances from their masters (2003:213, and note 32). Quite to the contrary, although Garland reminds us that perhaps the majority of the recipients of 1 Corinthians were slaves, they did not enjoy the luxury of being able to reject the sexual *demands* (not “advances”) of their owners—they had to obey or be subject to punishment and torture even unto death. For such slaves, interpretations such as Garland’s that they would be “excluded from the Kingdom of God” and life eternal for having obeyed sexual demands they could not reject, would be the worst news imaginable (cf. Bernadette Brooten on the death penalty prescribed in Lev 20:13 for both partners, even when the “homosexuality” involved a child or youth who had been sexually violated; 1996:290). Although Garland (2003:213) evidences no familiarity with the literature showing that Rom 1:26 does not refer to lesbians but to women offering themselves to males for anal sex “against nature” (to avoid pregnancy), he does not repeat the error of Robert Gagnon, who continually misinterprets the texts with

his importation of the modern concept of “complementarity” of the sexes. Nor does he recommend any “Ex-Gay” therapies with their false claims to “cure” homosexuals (another Gagnon error). Regarding Garland’s references to acts “against nature” (2003:214; Rom 1:26 and 11:24) and “shameful” see → Hanks 2006, Romans.

Moreover, in their studies on the sexual lives of slaves in antiquity, Jennifer Glancy and Albert Harrill pointed out a basic problem in traditional interpretations of Paul that conclude that the Apostle condemned all persons involved in sexual relations outside of marriage (Glancy 1998:481-501; 2002/06:63-70; Harrill 2006:129-144). Such an interpretation fails to take into account that the majority of members in many pauline churches were domestic slaves and that such slaves could not marry but were obligated to sexually serve their owners.

Garland recognizes that traditionally the churches interpreted *malakoi* as a condemnation of masturbation (2003:212, citing Boswell and Lapidé), although he fails to reveal how universal this interpretation was for almost 1500 years. Writers like Garland presuppose that Paul shared and reflected the homophobic prejudice expressed in the texts of hellenistic judaism (2003:213, citing Gagnon). Undoubtedly the vocabulary of Paul, as a Jew from the dispersion, often reflects the influence of his own culture. However, modern studies, although emphasizing the influence of this culture (in contrast with the earlier emphasis of classical Greek culture), also point out how Paul often transcends and even contradicts the culture of his formative years (Rom 12:1-2), thus provoking continual persecution by fellow Jews during his years of apostolic labor in the dispersion. As a follower of Jesus, the subversive, crucified Messiah, Paul manifests the same commitment to all the oppressed (poor, women, sexual minorities). Neither Jesus and his apostles, nor Paul and his co-workers, conformed themselves to the sexual ideology of nuclear “family values” with its patriarchal emphasis on procreating heirs. Therefore, Pauline theology in general and the concrete contents of his writings are our best guides to the meaning of the terms and theology in question. To reduce the great Apostle to the Gentiles to a mere reflection of the ignorance and prejudice of his contemporaries is neither wise nor just.

We do well to recall how texts that for centuries were believed written by Paul (1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:9-15; Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18) were cited (1) to insist that women ought to remain silent in the churches and always submit to male authority, considered superior; (2) to maintain a cruel system of racial slavery (Col 3:22-4:1; Eph 6:5-9; cf. Philemon); and (3) to maintain absolute monarchies (1 Tim 2:1-2) and oppose the rise of modern democracies. In recent decades, however, biblicists increasingly recognize Paul as an Apostle of liberty, a pioneer in the liberation from oppression of women, slaves, and oppressed peoples. Many now also see Paul as a pioneer in the liberation of sexual minorities, although some still defend traditional ideologies, citing a few texts of doubtful interpretation. In his treatment of marriage in 1 Cor 7 Garland himself provides abundant examples of the way Paul transcended the patriarchal sexual ideologies of his culture (Greek as well as Jewish)—although the author continually forgets that many persons *who are not heterosexual* have no gift for sexual abstinence and require regular expression of sexual love for their spiritual and emotional welfare (2003:250, 258-260).

The Presbyterian biblical scholar **Robert Gagnon (2001:303-39)** also recognizes that in the vice lists in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 the Greek term *arsenokoitai* does not refer to women (lesbians) nor to the sexual orientation of males, but rather is limited to a sexual act (which males of any sexual orientation may perform). *Nevertheless*, Gagnon defends the translation “homosexuals,” ignoring the fact that the most recent edition of the standard Greek lexicon BAGD (Danker 2000) abandons this translation as erroneous.

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- arsenokoites*, "(arsen 'male' + koite 'bed')....a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex, pederast" (BDAG 2000:135).
- malakos*, (1) "soft;" (2) "pertinent to being passive in a same-sex relationship, effeminate esp. of catamites, of men and boys who are sodomized by other males in such a relationship, opp. *arsenokoites*" (BDAG 2000:613).
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