

DOES THE BIBLE REALLY CALL HOMOSEXUALITY AN “ABOMINATION”?

This word, used for centuries to justify an anti-gay posture, has been badly translated and even more poorly understood.

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Homosexuality is abomination. The Christian Right says so all the time, and non-religious LGBT activists say it too, to relegate religion to humanity’s dustheap. After all, isn’t that what it says in the Bible?

No—and progressive religionists should not use the word. It’s a mistranslation and a misconception, doing harm to LGBT people and religious people alike.

The word “abomination” is found, of course, in the King James translation of Leviticus 18:22, a translation which reads, “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it [is] abomination.” Yet this is a thoroughly misleading rendition of the word *toevah*, which, while we may not know exactly what it means, definitely does not mean “abomination.” An “abomination” conjures up images of things which should not exist on the face of the earth: three-legged babies, oceans choked with oil, or Cheez-Whiz. And indeed, this is how many religious people regard gays and lesbians. *It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.* Homosexuality is unnatural, a perversion, a disease, an abomination.

Yet a close reading of the term *toevah* suggests an entirely different meaning: something permitted to one group, and forbidden to another. Though there is (probably) no etymological relationship, *toevah* means taboo.

The term *toevah* (and its plural, *toevot*) occurs 103 times in the Hebrew Bible, and almost always has the connotation of a non-Israelite cultic practice. In the Torah, the primary *toevah* is *avodah zara*, foreign forms of worship, and most other *toevot* flow from it. The Israelites are instructed not to commit *toevah* because other nations do so. Deuteronomy 18:9-12 makes this quite clear:

When you come into the land that YHVH your God gives you, do not learn to do the *toevot* of those nations. Do not find among you one who passes his son or daughter through the fire; or a magician; or a fortune teller, charmer, or witch... because all who do these things are *toevah* to YHVH and because of these *toevot* YHVH your God is driving them out before you.

Elsewhere, Deuteronomy 7:25-26 commands:

[Y]ou shall burn the statues of their gods in fire. Do not desire the silver and gold on them and take it onto yourself, else you be snared by it, for it is a toevah to YHVH your God. And you shall not bring toevah to your home

Deut. 12:31, 13:14, 17:4, 27:15, and 32:16 further identify idolatry, child sacrifice, witchcraft, and other “foreign” practices as toevah, and Deut. 20:18 says that avoiding toevah justifies the genocide of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. So, toevah is serious, but it is serious as a particular class of cultic offense: a transgression of national boundary. It is certainly not “abomination.”

Toevah is used four times in Leviticus 18—once to refer to male homosexual acts, and then three times as an umbrella term. As in Deuteronomy, the signal feature of toevot is that the other nations of the Land of Israel do them: “You shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, and shall not commit these toevot... because the people who were in the land before you did these toevot and made the land impure (*tameh*)” (Lev. 18:26-27; see also Lev. 18:29). The term is repeated with reference to homosexual activity in Lev. 20:13.

Similarly, the Books of Kings and Chronicles use toevah nine times to refer to acts that other nations did in the Land of Israel:

1 Kings 14:24 (general);

2 Kings 16:3 (child sacrifice);

2 Kings 21:2 and 2 Kings 21:11 (idolatry);

2 Chron. 28:3 (child sacrifice);

2 Chron. 33:2 (idolatry);

2 Chron. 34:33, 36:8, and 36:14 (general). (Ezra 9:1, 9:11, and 9:14 use the word in exactly the same way.)

In all these cases, toevah refers to a foreign cultic behavior wrongly practiced by Israelites and Israelite kings.

And likewise, the prophet Ezekiel uses the term toevah a record-setting 39 times to refer to idolatry (Ez. 5:11, 6:9, 6:11, 7:20, 14:6, 20:7-8, 22:2, 44:6-7, 44:13), usury (Ez. 18:13), haughtiness and pride (Ez. 16:47-50; the “Sin of Sodom”—more on that in a future article), heterosexual adultery (Ez. 22:11, 33:26), and violence (Ez. 33:26), as well as a general term for foreign acts (Ez. 16:51) or transgression, often in a cultic context (Ez. 5:9, 7:3-4, 7:8-9, 9:4, 11:18, 11:21, 12:16, 16:2, 16:43, 18:24, 20:4, 33:29, 36:31).

In one extended passage (Ez. 8:1-18), Ezekiel is taken on a visionary tour of toevot, all of which have to do with idolatry and each, Ezekiel says, is worse than the previous one, beginning with an image on the door of the gate of Jerusalem, to idols and imagery in a house of worship, to women weeping for the goddess Tammuz, to men worshipping the sun within the Temple itself. This extended passage, with six mentions of toevah, links the term in every instance with *avodah zara*, or idolatry.

In five instances, Ezekiel mentions toevah together with both idolatry and *zimah* or *znut*, “whoredom” (Ez. 16:22, 16:36, 16:58, 23:26, 43:8), strongly suggesting that the nature of sexual toevah is not mere lewdness, and certainly not loving intimate expression, but sexuality in a cultic context.

Detestable Because it is Foreign, or Foreign Because it is Detestable?

Now, so far, it is unclear whether a *toevah* is detestable because it is foreign, or foreign because it is detestable. This question is resolved elsewhere in the Bible, because Israelites are not the only ones with *toevot*. There are several examples of things which are *toevah* for Egyptians but perfectly acceptable for Israelites.

Genesis 43:32 states that eating with Israelites is *toevah* for Egyptians. Gen. 43:34 states that shepherds are *toevah* to Egyptians—the sons of Israel are themselves shepherds. In Exodus 8:22, Moses describes Israelite sacrifices as being *toevat mitzrayim* (*toevah* of Egypt), although obviously Israelite ritual is not an objective “abomination.” If *toevah* means abomination, then eating with shepherds, eating with Israelites, and Israelite sacrifices themselves must be abominable! Since this clearly is not the case, *toevah* cannot mean “abomination” in any ontological sense—it must be a relative quality.

Toevah can also mean other things. It can refer to ritual imperfection: Deut. 17:1 uses it to refer to the sacrifice of a blemished animal, and Deut. 19:19 bans as *toevah* sacrifices bought through prostitution or “the price of a dog.” Deut. 22:5 calls crossdressing a *toevah* (incidentally, in Orthodox Jewish law, this includes women wearing pants). Remarriage (i.e. of the same two parties) is *toevah* according to Deut. 24:4. The sole ethical use of the term in the Torah is in Deut. 25:16, in which the use of unequal weights and measures is called *toevah*.

In the Book of Proverbs (which comes late in the Bible but which scholars believe to have been composed prior to the Deuteronomic and Levitical material), *toevah* is used twenty-one times to refer to various ethical failings, including the ways, thoughts, prayers and sacrifices of the wicked (Prov. 3:32, 15:8-9, 15:26, 16:12, 21:27, 28:9), pride (Prov. 6:16, 16:5), evil speech (Prov. 8:7), false weights (Prov. 11:1, 20:10, 20:23), devious heartedness (Prov. 11:20), lying (Prov. 12:22, 26:25), scoffing (Prov. 24:9), justifying the wicked and defaming the righteous (Prov. 17:15). Interestingly, Proverbs 13:19 says that “to turn from evil is *toevah* to fools,” again suggesting that *toevah* is something relative in nature. Similarly, Prov. 29:27 says poetically: “An unjust man is *toevah* to the righteous, and the straightforward man is *toevah* to the wicked.”

Finally, other books of the Bible adapt the meaning of *toevah* in accord with their overall literary agendas. Isaiah uses it to refer to the sacrifices of hypocrites (1:13, 44:19), as a taunt against earthly power (41:14), and idolatry (66:3). Jeremiah associates *toevah* with idolatry (Jer. 2:7, 7:10, 32:35) and unspecified transgression (Jer. 6:15, 8:12, 44:22). Malachi (2:11) uses it to refer to the Israelites’ having “married the daughter of a foreign god.” And Psalm 88:9 poetically uses the term to refer to being alienated from one’s friend: “You have taken me far from my acquaintance; made me a *toevah* to him, put away, and I cannot come out.”

Even these variant uses, in most cases, point to the nature of *toevah* as something foreign or, more generally, something which is or ought to be far away from oneself. Proverbs’ use of *toevah* is the exception, rather than the rule; in the overwhelming majority of cases, *toevah* has nothing to do with ethics, and everything to do with cultic behavior, idolatry, and foreign ritual. However we may understand this type of transgression, it is certainly not “abomination” in the modern sense.

Indeed, “abomination” itself is an inexact translation, used by the King James and other biblical translations for multiple terms. The KJV uses the word twenty-six times to refer to *sheketz*, an analogous term to *toevah* which refers usually to idolatry and occasionally to other taboos such as forbidden animals (Lev. 11:10-13). Likewise, Leviticus 7:18 describes leftover

sacrificial meat as *pigul*—but King James again says “abomination.” And 1 Samuel 13:4, speaking of King Saul and the Philistines, uses the term *nivash*, yet again rendered as “abomination.” And so on, including 1 Kings 11:5-7, 2 Kings 23:13, Isaiah 66:17, Daniel 11:31, Daniel 12:11 (*sheketz*), and many more.

The KJV even uses “abomination” six times in translation of New Testament texts (Matthew 24:15, Mark 13:14, Luke 16:15, and Revelation 17:4-5, 21:27). All these biblical terms refer to different, albeit similar, violations, yet the umbrella term “abomination” elides any distinction between them. As a result, the KJV lists exactly 150 occurrences of the term “abomination,” though only 103 of them translate *toevah*.

Now, if by “abomination,” the King James means a cultural prohibition—something which a particular culture abhors but another culture enjoys—then the term makes sense. But in common parlance, the term has come to mean much more than that. Today, it connotes something horrible, something contrary to the order of nature itself, or God’s plan, or the institution of the family, or whatever. It is this malleability of meaning, and its close association with disgust, that makes “abomination” a particularly abominable word to use. The term implies that homosexuality has no place under the sun (despite its presence in over 300 animal species), and that it is an abomination against the Divine order itself. Again, *toevah* is not a good thing—but it doesn’t mean all of that.

Progressive religionists must stop using the word “abomination” to refer to *toevah*. The word plays into the hands of fundamentalists on the one hand, and anti-religious zealots on the other, both of whom want to depict the Bible as virulently and centrally concerned with the “unnatural” acts of gays and lesbians. In fact, *toevah* is mostly about idolatry, and male homosexual behavior is only as abominable as remarriage or not keeping kosher. Whenever we use the word “abomination” we are perpetuating the misunderstanding of biblical text and the religious persecution of LGBT people.

Personally, I like “taboo” as a replacement. It conveys the culturally relative nature of *toevah*, has some connotation of foreignness, and rightly aligns the taboo against homosexuality with taboos against, for example, eating unkosher food. It also has a vaguely archaic feel, which it should. Admittedly, “taboo” began as *tabu*, and specifically refers to a particular concept in Pacific indigenous religion; it is a bit inexact to import it to Judaism and Christianity. Yet the word has, by now, entered the common parlance, and in that general sense, it matches *toevah* fairly well. (Alternatively, we could stick with the Hebrew term, the foreignness of which heightens the foreignness of the biblical concerns about homosexuality.) One thing remains clear, though: what’s really abominable here is the word “abomination” itself.