

Biblical Self-Defense Course on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns

The Holy Truth and Nothing But the Truth About “Sodomite”

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Word Study: “Sodomite”

According to Boswell, “The word ‘sodomite’ occurs twice in the King James translation of the Old Testament in contexts which imply sexual sins [Deut. 23:17; I Kings 14:24]. Even if these were accurate translations, the word would not necessarily imply homosexuality, since by the early seventeenth century ‘sodomy’ referred to ‘unnatural’ sex acts of any type and included certain relationships between heterosexuals—anal intercourse, for example. But in fact these are simply mistranslations of a Hebrew word for temple prostitute. The word ‘kadash’ (plural ‘kadeshim’) literally means ‘hallowed’ or ‘sacred’ [or ‘holy’], referring to prostitutes in pagan temples. There is no reason to assume that such prostitutes serviced persons of their own sex. The word itself implies no such thing, and there is so little evidence about practices of the time that inferences from history are moot.

“Mistranslations of this word began very early. The Jewish scholars who effected the Septuagint translation into Greek in the third and second centuries BCE apparently had considerable difficulty in rendering ‘kadash’ in Greek: they employed no fewer than six different terms to translate the one Hebrew word. The uncertainty of the Jewish translators themselves is further reflected in the imprecision of many of the Greek words they chose and the fact that in at least one case they misrepresented the gender of the Hebrew.

“None of the terms which appear in the Septuagint as translations for ‘kadash’ would have suggested homosexuality to the theologians of the

early church, who relied almost exclusively on the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Vulgate rendered the terms as ‘effeminati’ and ‘scortator.’ Only the former could be taken as relating to gay sexuality, but in fact almost no theologians invoked these passages as condemnations of homosexual behavior until after the mistranslation of the words into English. They are wholly irrelevant to the development of attitudes toward homosexuality in medieval Christendom.” [Boswell, pp. 98, 99.]

Commenting on the six occurrences of the masculine noun for cult prostitute (qadesh) in the Hebrew Bible [Deut. 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; and Job 36:14], Edwards contends “that same-sex rites belonged to the office of the qadesh” for the following reasons:

“First, the context of the two prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 suggests that what is opposed is not same-sex activity outside the cult, as in the modern secular sense, but within the cult identified as Canaanite.

“Second, under patriarchy, only male members of the congregation were participants in ritual proceedings. It is not convincing, therefore, to assume that the qadesh, if sexual functions are assumed, should serve female worshipers.

“Third, it is not a weighty objection that homosexual copulation can possess no meaning in a cult of reproduction fertility, because intercourse with the cult prostitute as representative of the deity was supposed to effect, in a magical way, the divine cosmic mystery of fructification, even

among crops and animals. The cultic act transcended the biological union of the parties engaged in the ritual event.

“Fourth, the conjunction of male qadesh and female qedesha in a text like Deuteronomy 23:17 (in which the sexual function of the female is not contested) does have modest evidential value in company with the arguments already mentioned.

“If one assumes, however, that a large importance attaches to the view that the male cult prostitute did engage in homosexual acts, the conclusion presumes an emphasis inappropriate to the marked scarcity of evidence at one’s command. A more significant line of inquiry presents itself in the preponderance of references to the female ministrants and in the comprehensive question why cultic prostitution, male or female, should come under Deuteronomic stricture [the third biblical literary tradition].” [Edwards, pp. 57, 58.]

References

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. Boswell cites the King James Version of scripture (KJV). Space prohibits the inclusion of his footnotes although they provide much explanation and many references.

Edwards, George R. *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective*. New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1984.

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