

April 10, 2016  
Affirming Sermon #4  
Leviticus 20:10-24

Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo.

(Explain how this sentence works: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo\\_buffalo\\_Buffalo\\_buffalo\\_buffalo\\_buffalo\\_Buffalo\\_buffalo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo_buffalo_Buffalo_buffalo_buffalo_buffalo_Buffalo_buffalo))

This is such a great example of how meaning and context are intertwined. Sometimes we just don't know what something means until we understand its context. In this case, we can only sort out that the word "buffalo" is a noun or a verb by paying attention to what its context is – what the other words around it are doing.

Context informs meaning. Context carries meaning. Context alters meaning.

Paula read for us a moment or two ago from a section of the Old Testament called "The Holiness Code." It starts in Leviticus 17 and 10 chapters later it ends. In between are a raft of laws and injunctions, about what is and is not acceptable for God's people. And it has an awful lot to say about sex.

Do not uncover the nakedness of this person or that person. Do not lie with this person or that person.... well, you heard a portion of it earlier. It's very bloody. Everybody being put to death for this or that strange coupling. You even have to kill the poor animal if one was involved. Yuck! It might be better just to skip over this part of the scriptures all together.

This is not the sort of stuff that one would be inclined to read in church, if it weren't for verse 13: IF A MAN LIES WITH A MALE AS WITH A WOMAN, BOTH OF THEM HAVE COMMITTED AN ABOMINATION; THEY SHALL BE PUT TO DEATH; THEIR BLOOD IS UPON THEM.

Verse 13 is a Clobber Text. A verse used by some Christians to clobber members of the LGBTQ community, as if it proves that the Bible, and therefore God, and therefore the church, condemn their sexual orientation. "It says so in the Bible, right here in Leviticus 20." Clobber.

So we have an obligation as a Christian community not to skip over this verse, but to slow down and pay attention to it and ask the simple question: what does it mean? That's fair enough, isn't it? What does this verse mean?

Well, context informs meaning, as we know from the Buffalo buffalo. A word carries many meanings, which one is intended? You must pay attention to the context.

And in this case, I propose that we have four contexts to pay attention to: The context of idolatry; the context of translation; the context of knowledge; and the context of the gospel. And then we might be able to hazard a guess about what it means.

So, let's begin. The context of idolatry.

Perhaps you remember that in the biblical narrative, Moses led the Israelite people up out of exile in the land of Egypt. Behind them was the land of their enslavement, a foreign land with strange rituals and a religion that was not their own. Ahead of them, in their new land, were many peoples with their own religions and rituals. In scripture it is clear that God does not want them to convert to those other religions.

In Leviticus 18, another part of the Holiness Code, we read this: THE LORD SPOKE TO MOSES, SAYING: 2 SPEAK TO THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND SAY TO THEM: I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.3YOU SHALL NOT DO AS THEY DO IN THE LAND OF EGYPT, WHERE YOU LIVED, AND YOU SHALL NOT DO AS THEY DO IN THE LAND OF CANAAN, TO WHICH I AM BRINGING YOU. YOU SHALL NOT FOLLOW THEIR STATUTES. 4MY ORDINANCES YOU SHALL OBSERVE AND MY STATUTES YOU SHALL KEEP, FOLLOWING THEM: I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.

It's as if God is saying to them, "You walk among strangers with strange ways! You will be tempted to do what they do, so to protect you, I am going to give you this set of laws. Follow them, and you will be safe. Break these laws and you will not be safe, because I will not protect you." This is serious stuff.

But assimilation is a powerful force. Clearly some of the Israelites were integrating Egyptian or Canaanite traditions into their way of living. And some of these foreign behaviours had to do with idol worship. Especially the fun ones, involving sex.

Pastor Paul Turner, of Gentle Spirit Christian Church in Atlanta, GA, has this to say:

In Leviticus ... it is written: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." (NIV) That in face does seem very clear. But look at the surrounding context, and something else comes to light in this verse. Leviticus 18:6-18 deals with having sexual relations with relatives. ...

Then, verse 21 changes directions and begins a sermon-like discourse on sexual relations that are associated with the worship of Molech. Molech, ... had temple prostitutes, and Molech's followers believed that having sex of any kind in the temple would please Molech and increase the fertility of themselves, their spouses, their livestock, and their fields. ... Verse 22 should more accurately read "Do not have sex with the male temple prostitutes," which would continue the admonition in idolatry. In fact, the entire Chapter is about idolatry. ... Why would a writing about sex be inserted here out of the blue in between two chapters on idolatry unless it also is meant to address idolatry? ... this verse must speak of idolatry and false worship in some manner. Therefore, it is not a blanket condemnation of homosexuality, but rather a condemnation of the sexual promiscuity of the many idol-worshipping sects in the land the Israelites were coming into.[1]

It would appear that in the context of idolatry, these verses could reasonably be understood to mean YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME... (Exodus 20:3)

Next: The context of translation.

Let's not forget that everything that we read in our Bibles today is a translation from the original Hebrew – which itself may or may not have been accurately preserved in its original form through the roughly 2700 years since it was first written down.

Since I am not a Hebrew scholar, I want to share with you what the Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance have published about Leviticus 18:22:

In transliterated Hebrew, the verse is written: "V'et zachar lo tishkav mishk'vey eeshah toeyvah hee."

The first part of this verse is literally translated as "And with a male you shall not lay lyings of a woman" ... theologians, Bible translations and biblical commentators ... do not agree on the full scope of the forbidden activities....

The verse is, unfortunately, incomplete. Its precise meaning is ambiguous. The phrase "lay lyings" has no obvious interpretation. Attempts have been made to make sense out of the original Hebrew by inserting a short phrase into the verse. For example:

The Net Bible® translation inserts two words to produce "And with a male you shall not lay [as the] lyings of a woman." A man must not have sexual intercourse with another man as he would normally have with a woman. i.e. anal intercourse between two men is not permitted. ...

An alternative translation would insert a different pair of words to produce: "And with a male you shall not lay [in the] lyings of a woman." That is, two men must not engage in sexual behavior on a woman's bed. Presumably, they must go elsewhere to have sex; a woman's bed was sacred and was to be reserved for opposite-gender sexual behavior.[2]

"And with a male you shall not lay lyings of a woman." In the context of a difficult translation, then, it is quite possible that the original meaning of this text has been lost.

Carrying on. Third: The context of knowledge.

I am going to say something pretty obvious, but I think it bears mentioning: We know things in our day that the ancient Egyptians didn't know in theirs. They lived in a world governed by spirits and gods; we live in a world governed by natural forces. Death was all around them, from a cut on the finger to a flood or a famine; we are protected by medicine and engineering.

Their only protection was God. And sometimes that protection failed. Why? Who knows. But it's a very natural inclination to find someone to blame – the one who doesn't act like the rest of us.

Biblical scholars point out that there is no scriptural description of committed same-sex relationships which endure through time. There is no concept of sexual orientation. There is no awareness of gender diversity or the spectrum of gender identities which we are only beginning to become comfortable with publicly.

Where scriptural texts condemn same-sex behaviours they are condemning acts, not orientation. Sexual acts devoid of love and tenderness, like temple prostitution, are equated with apostasy, or angering God, and thus with putting the whole community at risk of God's perceived punishment.[3] Maybe this verse means YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FOR YOURSELVES AN IDOL. (Exodus 20:4)

Finally, we come to the context of gospel.

Many, many people point out the hypocrisy of holding up any part of Leviticus as Law for us today. My favourite critique comes from Kent Ashcraft, who wrote the following in a letter to television personality, Dr. Laura Schlessinger:

Dear Dr. Laura:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law....I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some other elements of God's Laws and how to follow them.

1. Leviticus 25:44 states that I may possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

2. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?...

6. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination, Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this? Are there 'degrees' of abomination?

7. Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle-room here?[4]

Clearly, there is a problem picking and choosing which of the ancient laws to take literally. But the deeper critique of the idea of the Law comes from the New Testament. There we learn that we are a gospel people, living in the promise of eternal life, won for us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As resurrection people, the old law has no hold over us.

Paul makes this clear in Romans 7:4 MY FRIENDS, YOU HAVE DIED TO THE LAW THROUGH THE BODY OF CHRIST, SO THAT YOU MAY BELONG TO ANOTHER, TO HIM WHO HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD IN ORDER THAT WE MAY BEAR FRUIT FOR GOD.

We are a new creation, all of us sinners under the Law; all of us set free for freedom in the Gospel, the good news, of Jesus.[5]

Idolatry. Translation. Knowledge. Gospel. Four different contexts to use in asking just one question: what does this mean?

A fair question. Perhaps it means this: that in this world there are many things that might seduce us away from The Way, many things which we might call Idol worship, because they are exciting, or risky, or entertaining, but ultimately they are empty. Avoid them. Avoid them because they are distractions, and stay on the path which Jesus showed us.

It was he who refused to condemn the woman brought before him who had been caught in adultery. The scribes and Pharisees said, John 8:3 'TEACHER, THIS WOMAN WAS CAUGHT IN THE VERY ACT OF COMMITTING ADULTERY. NOW IN THE LAW MOSES COMMANDED US TO STONE SUCH WOMEN. NOW WHAT DO YOU SAY?'

The old Law was clear: Stone her to death. But he refused to condemn her – he let her walk free. We live under the same freedom, the new Law of compassion and of grace! Thanks be to God.

(A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at Huron Shores United Church, Grand Bend, Ontario [www.huronshoresunitedchurch.com](http://www.huronshoresunitedchurch.com))

[1] Paul Turner, "Seeds of Hope: But Leviticus Says..." on the website Whosoever, found at <http://whosoever.org/seeds/letter84.shtml>, accessed on Wednesday, April 6, 2016.

[2] Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance, "Homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22 – Context and Analysis of Leviticus 18:22" found on the website ReligiousTolerance at [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_bibh4.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_bibh4.htm), accessed on Wednesday, April 06, 2016.

[3] See "Israel's Holiness Code. (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13)" on the website Would Jesus Discriminate? found at [http://www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/biblical\\_evidence/leviticus.html](http://www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/biblical_evidence/leviticus.html), accessed on Wednesday, April 6, 2016.

[4] <http://www.snopes.com/politics/religion/drlaura.asp>

[5][5] Ron Goetz, "You Can't Quote Leviticus to Prove God Hates Homosexuality," found at <http://biblethumpingliberal.com/2011/05/19/you-can%E2%80%99t-quote-leviticus-to-prove-god-hates-homosexuality/>, accessed on Wednesday, April 6, 2016.