



## [My Take: The Bible's surprisingly mixed messages on sexuality](#)



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*Editor's Note: Jennifer Wright Knust is author of [Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire](#).*

We often hear that Christians have no choice but [to regard homosexuality as a sin](#)- that Scripture simply demands it.

As a [Bible scholar and pastor](#) myself, I say that Scripture does no such thing.

"I love gay people, but the Bible forces me to condemn them" is a poor excuse that attempts to avoid accountability by wrapping a very particular and narrow interpretation of a few biblical passages in a cloak of divinely inspired respectability.

Truth is, Scripture can be interpreted in any number of ways. And biblical writers held a much more complicated view of human sexuality than contemporary debates have acknowledged.

In Genesis, for example, it would seem that God's original intention for humanity was androgyny, not sexual differentiation and heterosexuality.

Genesis includes two versions of the story of God's creation of the human person. First, God creates humanity male and female and then God forms the human person again, this time in the

Garden of Eden. The second human person is given the name Adam and the female is formed from his rib.

Ancient Christians and Jews explained this two-step creation by imagining that the first human person possessed the genitalia of both sexes. Then, when the androgynous, dually-sexed person was placed in the garden, s/he was divided in two.

According to this account, the man “clings to the woman” in an attempt to regain half his flesh, which God took from him once he was placed in Eden. As third century Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman explained, when God created the first man, God created him with two faces. “Then he split the androgyne and made two bodies, one on each side, and turned them about.”

When the apostle Paul envisioned the bodies that would be given to humanity at the end of time, he imagined that they would be androgynous, “not male and female.” The third-century non-canonical Gospel of Philip, meanwhile, lamented that sexual difference had been created at all: “If the female had not separated from the male, she and the male would not die. That being’s separation became the source of death.”

From these perspectives, God’s original plan was sexual unity in one body, not two. The Genesis creation stories can support the notion that sexual intercourse is designed to reunite male and female into one body, but they can also suggest that God’s blessing was first placed on an undifferentiated body that didn’t have sex at all.

Heterosexual sex was therefore an afterthought designed to give back the man what he had lost.

Despite common misperceptions, biblical writers could also imagine same-sex intimacy as a source of blessing. For example, the seemingly intimate relationship between the Old Testament’s David and Jonathan, in which Jonathan loved David more than he loved women, may have been intended to justify David’s rise as king.

Jonathan, not David, was a king’s son. David was only a shepherd. Yet by becoming David’s “woman,” Jonathan voluntarily gave up his place for his beloved friend.

Thus, Jonathan “took great delight in David,” foiling King Saul’s attempts to arrange for David’s death (1 Samuel 19:1). Choosing David over his father, Jonathan makes a formal covenant with his friend, asking David to remain faithful to him and his descendants.

Sealing the covenant, David swears his devotion to Jonathan, “for he loved him as he loved his own life” (1 Samuel 20:17). When Jonathan is killed, King David composes a eulogy for him, praising his devotion: “greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26).

Confident claims about the forms of sex rejected by God are also called into question by early Christian interpretations of the story of Sodom. From the perspective of the New Testament, it was the near rape of angels - not sex between men - that led to the demise of the city.

Linking a strange story in Genesis about “sons of God” who lust after “daughters of men” to the story of the angels who visit Abraham’s nephew Lot, New Testament writers concluded that the mingling of human and divine flesh is an intolerable sin.

As the New Testament letter Jude puts it:

And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and went after strange flesh, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire (Jude 6-7).

The first time angels dared to mix with humans, God flooded the earth, saving only Noah, his family, and the animals. In the case of Sodom, as soon as men attempted to engage in sexual activity with angels, God obliterated the city with fire, delivering only Lot and his family. Sex with angels was regarded as the most dangerous and offensive sex of all.

It’s true that same-sex intimacy is condemned in a few biblical passages. But these passages, which I can count on one hand, are addressed to specific sex acts and specific persons, not to all humanity forever, and they can be interpreted in any number of ways.

The book of Leviticus, for example, is directed at Israelite men, offering instructions regarding legitimate sexual partners so long as they are living in Israel. Biblical patriarchs and kings violate nearly every one of these commandments.

Paul’s letters urge followers of Christ to remain celibate and blame all Gentiles in general for their poor sexual standards. Jesus, meanwhile, says nothing at all about same-sex pairing, and when he discusses marriage, he discourages it.

So why are we pretending that the Bible is dictating our sexual morals? It isn’t.

Moreover, as Americans we should have learned by now that such a simplistic approach to the Bible will lead us astray.

Only a little more than a century ago, many of the very same passages now being invoked to argue that the scriptures label homosexuality a sin or that God cannot countenance gay marriage were used to justify not “biblical marriage” but slavery.

Yes, the apostle Paul selected same-sex pairings as one among many possible examples of human sin, but he also assumed that slavery was acceptable and then did nothing to protect slaves from sexual use by their masters, a common practice at the time. Letters attributed to him go so far as to command slaves to obey their masters and women to obey their husbands as if they were obeying Christ.

These passages served as fundamental proof texts to those who were arguing that slavery was God’s will and accusing abolitionists of failing to obey biblical mandates.

It is therefore disturbing to hear some Christian leaders today claim that they have no choice but to regard homosexuality as a sin. They do have a choice and should be held accountable for the ones they are making.