

Arsenokoitai

This one word has doomed generations of LGBTQIA2S+ Christians to persecution and shame, and yet you've probably never even heard it, *so what exactly is this word?* Well, the short answer is... it's complicated. This word has long been the base of homophobia within the Church due to its poor translation. Biblical literalist and conservative Christians often translate this ancient Greek word to mean "homosexual" in English, which solidifies their belief that God condemns same-gender relationships. Arsenokoitai is used only twice in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. Arsenokoitai (**ἀρσενοκοίτης**) is an ancient Greek word that the Apostle Paul created and used in his letters, this also means that there are no other uses of the word in the Bible or other cultural texts of the time. This makes finding out the true meaning of the word next to impossible. Especially since translators use other outside texts, examples and context to learn what ancient languages are trying to say.

If it is impossible to translate this word, why do people think it means homosexual? Well, the only hint we have in deciphering the meaning of this word is that it is a compound word. Compound words are formed when two or more words are put together to form a new word with a new meaning. A good example of this is the word "butterfly," without context, we would not think of a beautiful insect, but rather we would think of a fly made from butter. This combination changes the meaning, and may not relate to the two words that it is made from. The two words that are put together in this case, are "arsén" which means male and "koité" which means bed. A direct reading would be "male-bed". Some have understood Paul to have created this word by translating, to Greek, the verse from Leviticus 20:13 "males who lie with males." Due to its unclear definition, English translators struggled with representing the concept of arsenokoitai. Some examples in the early 16-20th century stated that Arsenokoitai meant "Liers with mankind", "Sodomites", "Abusers of themselves with mankind" and "those who abuse themselves with men." This suggested that Arsenokoitai did not represent what we know as sexual orientation, but rather the roles in which sexual acts were committed. The closest meaning of Arsenokoitai with the very little knowledge we have is "men who took active roles in non-procreative sex". This understanding shifted in the 1940s when translations, such as the

Revised Standard Version, began translating Arsenokoitai to mean “homosexual.” Some of the newer translations we see today translate Arsenokoitai to mean “pervert”, “sexual pervert”, “sodomite”, “homosexual” and “those who practice homosexuality” This shifted the concept of Arsenokoitai from being simply a role that was played to being someone’s intrinsic identity.

So what is the most accurate translation? Well, with all of the information we know regarding Paul, the context of where he was writing, who he was talking to, and what he was referencing, our best-educated guess is that it means some kind of sexual/economic exploitation. The Hebrew words “arsen” and “koiten” were used to describe events 1,600 years before Paul and those events always related to some form of pedophilia or abuse. In Biblical times, same-sex behaviour was primarily perceived as happening between adult men and adolescent boys (masters and servants), via prostitution, and by men who were already married to women. This means Paul was condemning the use of power for abusive purposes, any and all excess lust, and prostitution. From this we can infer that the concept of Arenokoitai is sexual and economic exploitation, and thus there is no way we can relate these verses to the committed, loving, consensual same-gender relationships we see today. The history of this word is complicated, but now it is time to undo history and correct the narrative.

Shylo Rosborough (He/Him)

Affirming Ministries Coordinator