I began to discuss yesterday the interesting case that NT scholar Scot McKnight advances for thinking that maybe Jesus *does* speak of same-sex relations in the Gospels. The last (group) of his three references are the ones he thinks are the most likely instances:

Matthew 5:32

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 15:19

For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

The Greek word for “sexual immorality” here is porneia. It is a broad term that probably does mean something like “sexual immorality.” Scot argues that any Jew in the first century who wanted to know what sexual immorality was would automatically think and turn to Leviticus 18, the passage I referred to in an earlier post, a passage that considers a sex with certain others is not just inappropriate but an “abomination.” Included in the list is “men with men.” Jesus therefore is condemning homosexual relations.

There’s some sense in that and it seems kind of obvious. But several points need to be stressed. First, it’s important to stress the obvious Jesus actually doesn’t mention same-sex relations here. So to say Jesus “condemns” them, or even “mentions” them is too strong. Jesus is condemning every kind of sexual immorality. And so the question is: Would he have included same-sex relations in that category? He may well have – but he doesn’t say and doesn’t even talk about the issue. Our question is whether Jesus talks about same sex relations. No, he doesn’t.

But there’s something else to consider here that’s even more important. Scot wants to focus on the term “porneia” and argues that it means a range of sexual activities, proscribed in Leviticus 18. For one thing, Jesus wasn’t speaking Greek so he didn’t use the word porneia. I’m not sure what word he used in Aramaic, but it’s a bit tricky to say that he used one term in his language, which translates into another term into a different language that Jesus didn’t speak, and that other word in the other language means something broadly, but to see what it means broadly we have to look at a passage in a third language that the author of Matthew’s Gospel probably didn’t read and certainly doesn’t refer to. If you see what I mean.

But there’s a yet bigger problem. If you do want to talk about the Greek word porneia, as Scot does, I think you really need to figure out what the word actually meant to the people who used it back then. And it means things that Scot doesn’t seem to have in mind.

One piece of evidence that it is NOT simply referring to all of the practices proscribed in Leviticus 18, and that therefore he has same-sex acts in mind, is that in the context of the two passages cited above, at the beginning of this post, in the first one “same-sex acts” doesn’t make sense (as I’ll try to show) and in the second one the reference does not appear to be to Leviticus 18.
In terms of the first passage, Matthew Jesus here is giving an interpretation of Jewish law, saying that Moses did allow for divorce but, in Jesus view, a strict interpretation of the law would suggest that in fact it’s not allowable. Divorce is not an option. With one exception: sexual immorality.

I should point out that Matthew got this saying of Jesus from Mark, which makes no exception at all (see Mark 10:11). This is probably the earliest form of Jesus’ teaching: no divorce, ever. That’s not exactly acceptable in the modern world, and so most Christians ignore it, as so often happens with passages in the Bible that are clearly no longer applicable.

Except, of course, the ones some Christians really do still like (so of course it is sometimes is OK to get a divorce; but hey, no same-sex relations! The Bible says so!).

In any event, Matthew has altered Mark’s dictum (on the lips of Jesus) to say that divorce is not acceptable EXCEPT in the case of “sexual immorality.” In other words, the only time a man can divorce his wife is if she has had immoral sex. Porneia. It should be clear that he’s not talking specifically about lesbian sex. The issue is men and women and what it means to commit “adultery.” But in every discussion of the term of “adultery” in ancient Jewish sources, it involves men with women, not women with women.

But you think, yes, OK, but he’s actually not saying just adultery: he’s saying all kinds of sexual misconduct. OK, fair enough. So what does that entail? What does “porneia” cover?

You should not think it must refer to the items listed in Leviticus 18. That’s because of the next passage. Here it’s clear that for the author of Matthew (let alone Jesus) “porneia” does not mean “what is talked about in Leviticus 18.” That’s because right before porneia, and along with it, Jesus lists among the “bad thing” specifically, “adultery.” The problem is that adultery is one of the things mentioned in Leviticus 18 (you can’t have sex with your neighbor’s wife). And so, if as Scot asserts, “porneia” simply refers to all the things in Leviticus 18, then it would already include adultery, and there would be no need to mention adultery again. That shows Jesus is not simply thinking that “porneia” involves the things listed in Leviticus 18.

So what is porneia then? Yes, it is sexual immorality. But, unbeknownst apparently to the world at large, including most scholars, in ancient Greek sources means something more than “inappropriate partners” – the topic of Leviticus 18. It also includes “inappropriate sex acts” even with your partner. Really.

This has been discussed in a recent article jointly authored by Jennifer Knust (one of our recent guest bloggers!), Dale Martin, and David Wheeler-Reed, entitled, surprisingly, “Can a Man Commit Porneia with his Wife?” It turns out that the answer for many Jewish and Christian authors in antiquity, the answer is “yes.”

You can see the article here (it uses some Greek words, especially the Greek word for “porneia” = πορνεία), but it’s not a difficult article for non scholars to follow: http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/sites/719/2018/09/jbl.1372.2018.345030.pdf

They prove it. They look at how the word actually gets used in Greek, Jewish, and Christian authors. In classical Greek, “porneia” means “prostitution.” Pretty much that simple.

Jews and then Christians later started using it for other sexual activities other than
prostitution that were condemned. It’s a long story. The short of it is, in a number of important texts, porneia meant any kind of sex that was not with your “legitimate” wife for purposes of procreation. It is used to refer to inappropriate sex men have with prostitutes, with fallen angels, with a wife if she is from a different tribe (i.e. exogamy or miscegeny), with a concubine who is not a wife. But also with a wife who is menstruating or pregnant. Or on a Sabbath. Or, most telling, only in order to fulfill “passion and lust” – that is, out of desire rather than to make babies. Or in ways that can make babies.

OK, then. If we want to say that in Matthew when Jesus condemns “porneia” he is tacitly referring to same-sex relations, and condemning them, we’d have to say he is tacitly referring to oral sex, anal sex, sex on Saturday, sex when a legitimate spouse is menstruating, or when the only real object is to fulfill sexual desire.

And so why would people want to say that Jesus particularly has in mind same-sex sexual relations here? Because that’s what they are concerned about. They would never say that he’s talking about these other things. Or about what specifically happens in an intimate moment. Even if that could be every bit as much what he is referring to. And if he is, why is there not a move not only to deprive gay, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals of their civil rights, but also to throw in jail anyone who has sex just because they want to?

People pick and choose what they want when it comes to discussing biblical views of sexual ethics.

Setting Dates for the Gospels
Maybe Jesus DOES Talk about “Homosexuality”?