

THE STORY OF ARSENOKOITES ACCORDING TO BDAG

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The “Puritan canopy” that once overarched our city-on-a-hill began to fray and tear apart long ago—though that canopy always had its gaps (and its cotton-poly blends with American civil religion).¹ The morality Christendom bequeathed to the Western world more generally still covers many areas of U.S. culture, and by God’s common grace the stitching is often quite strong, but Christian sexual morality is clearly in tatters.

It was exactly twenty years ago that a Democratic U.S. president signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). He did so between the eighth and ninth of ten sexual encounters with a White House intern; national acceptance of his philandering soon radically undercut DOMA, if anyone noticed.² And in two decades same-sex marriage went from a radically unthinkable idea to a popular digital ornament for Facebook profile pictures. And recently an entire nation wasted approximately 4.3% of GDP arguing online over transgender bathrooms.

As Charles Taylor would say, the “social imaginary” has been reshaped for all of us—it is striking how quickly even my own sensibilities have shifted: I admit I am simply not shocked by the open displays of homosexuality and transgenderism that occur daily in the city where I work.³ The librarian who helped me get some books for this paper noticed their content and cheerily told me that she was a lesbian who sought Washington state as a refuge from the harassment she had received in a more conservative part of the country.⁴ She made that move twenty years ago, and one wonders whether she would feel it necessary to do so today.

MAINTAINING THE CANOPY

We have no direct access to the strategies, the “wiles,” of the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience. But it is not difficult to see that those children have focused their canopy-ripping efforts on certain weak spots: American *heterosexual* immorality and hypocrisy, the honored banners

¹ Mark Noll, *America’s God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 19XX), X.

² As Shelby Steele trenchantly observed, “It was the good luck of [President Clinton] to sin into the moral relativism of his era rather than into its Puritanism.”

³ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 26.

⁴ The harassment was indeed indefensible. Vigilante moralism via crudities shouted out car windows at stoplights is not the preferred Christian method of maintaining the moral canopy.

of “freedom” and “equality,” our value-free scientific modernism, even our guilt over past civil rights abuses against racial minorities.

It is a mark of the success of those strategies that attacks are being levied more and more publicly against what once appeared to be an impregnable section of the Puritan canopy: scriptural statements about homosexuality. The opening salvos were probably fired by James Nelson⁵, John Boswell⁶, and Robin Scroggs⁷ in the late 1970s and early 1980s, who tended to argue that Paul’s references to homosexuality only proscribed specific, exploitative forms of the practice.⁸

Mainline Protestantism (and to a lesser degree, liberal Catholicism) was hit first—indeed, its scholars were the ones firing. The fact that the mainline did not capitulate immediately, and still has not done so completely, is testimony to the strength of the traditional interpretation of biblical prohibitions of homosexual acts.⁹ (The laggard among the mainline is the United Methodist Church: though its Western jurisdiction elected its first openly homosexual bishop just days ago as of this writing¹⁰, the national leadership of the denomination has not affirmed the decision.¹¹) But no observers have predicted a conservative resurgence in the mainline akin to that of the Southern Baptist Convention. The trend line is clear.

And evangelicals are next. Every time a self-described evangelical institution such as World Vision,¹² an evangelical church such as City Church San

⁵ *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1978).

⁶ *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁷ *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

⁸ An earlier book, cited by Danker, failed to

⁹ Homosexuality has achieved differing levels of acceptance in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PCUSA), the Episcopal Church (TEC), the American Baptist Churches (ABCUSA), the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Disciples of Christ.

¹⁰ <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/western-jurisdiction-elects-openly-gay-united-methodist-bishop>

¹¹ <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/cob-president-addresses-western-jurisdiction-episcopal-election-results>

¹² See Celeste Gracey and Jeremy Weber, “World Vision: Why We’re Hiring Gay Christians in Same-Sex Marriages,” Christianity Today online, March 24, 2014. (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/march-web-only/world-vision-why-hiring-gay-christians-same-sex-marriage.html>)

Francisco,¹³ or an evangelical individual such as Jen Hatmaker¹⁴ affirms homosexual sex, more weight is added to the argument that only bigotry and animus can explain conservatives' continued refusal to take up the remaining empty seats on the bandwagon.

For the good of our Christian neighbors who face increasing pressure to affirm the goodness of every sexual desire, for the spiritual health of Christians who find themselves with unwanted same-sex attraction, for the good of children who need their mothers and fathers,¹⁵ and for the sake of lesbian librarians—we must attend to the maintenance of the portions of the canopy under which we are still permitted to huddle. Perhaps we can strengthen and even expand it in our culture.

BDAG AND THE STORY OF ARSENOKOİTES

This paper has a definite polemical purpose but a scholarly angle: it offers a two-part counteroffensive strategy for Christian conservatives: 1) learn the major outlines of the debate over ἀρσενοκοίτης so you can speak knowledgeably and persuasively about the Bible's teaching on homosexuality, and 2) use the “as-one-of-your-own-poets-hath-said” strategy by appealing to the authority of an honest and respected mainline liberal Protestant, namely Frederick W. Danker, the D in BDAG.

Danker's BDAG entry for ἀρσενοκοίτης is not just presenting “the facts”; it is summarizing and even *making* an argument. It is telling something of a story, a story which begins with Paul—the first writer we know of to use the word—and stops at the time of the Defense of Marriage Act (the entry's most recent citation is to an article published in 1996). It is my opinion that the passage of time has not materially altered the debate over ἀρσενοκοίτης.

¹³ Such as City Church, an evangelical, San Francisco megachurch originally modeled after Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City: <http://bit.ly/2agwCTl>. See also Robert Gagnon, “Why San Francisco's City Church is Wrong about Sex,” *First Things* Web Exclusives, March 17, 2015 (<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/03/why-san-franciscos-biggest-megachurch-is-wrong-about-sex>).

¹⁴ Jen Hatmaker, for example, who first opines that good Christians can differ over homosexuality (<http://jenhatmaker.com/blog/2014/03/25/world-vision-gay-marriage-and-a-different-way-through>) and then expresses ambiguous support for it (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=946752262090436&id=203920953040241).

¹⁵ See the work of Mark Regnerus.

In fact, the basic shape of the debate was in place by 1984,¹⁶ after which time the retreat to sloganeering could begin in earnest for all sides.

I will structure this paper according to the outline of the BDAG entry for ἀρσενοκοίτης.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF ΑΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΗΣ

Danker begins with the etymology, as he commonly does: ἀρσην + κοίτης = male + bed.

“Bed” is potentially misleading; Danker’s own entry for the word shows that “sexual intercourse” was an established figurative extension of the literal sense of κοίτης, not unlike “bed” in English. But while the English words “bed” and “sleep” often require specific phrasal-verb “helping” words, to bring out a sexual sense¹⁷ (“He bedded her *down*,” “She was sleeping *with* him”), κοίτη could stand on its own as a euphemism for sexual relations (Rom. 13:13; Heb. 13:4).¹⁸ Danker also chose not to reflect the suffix in his etymology: -ης is equivalent to -er. Etymologically, an ἀρσενοκοίτης is a male-bedder(-downer).

When a word is well attested, appeals to etymology may be of intellectual interest but are irrelevant to—or even misleading for—the work of discovering its semantic value. So Yale’s [Dale Martin](#) is generally correct to say, in a book chapter Danker later cites, that it is “linguistically invalid” and “highly precarious” to attempt to discover

the meaning of a word by taking it apart, getting the meanings of its component parts, and then assuming, with no supporting evidence, that the meaning of the longer word is a simple combination of its component parts. To “understand” does not mean to “stand under.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Writers today still cite David F. Wright’s response to John Boswell in *Vigiliae Christianae*, “Homosexuals of Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἀρσενοκοίται” (Vol. 38, No. 2, June 1984) as a definitive contribution to the debate.

¹⁷ “Waiting on” someone is different than “waiting for” someone—“waiting on” is a phrasal verb.

¹⁸ One measure of how established the figurative, sexual senses of “bed” and “sleep” are is whether people reliably snicker when “They went to bed together” and “They slept together” are used in clearly non-sexual contexts.

¹⁹ “Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences,” in *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*, edited by Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: WJK, 1996), 117–36.

Understand and *butterfly* are not transparent compounds but opaque ones.

But Martin err when he goes on to enlists the authority of James Barr's *Semantics of Biblical Language* to argue that

all definitions of *arsenokoités* that derive its meaning from its components are naive and indefensible. Furthermore, the claim that *arsenokoités* came from a combination of these two words and therefore means "men who have sex with men" makes the additional error of defining a word by its (assumed) etymology. The etymology of a word is its history, not its meaning.²⁰

Martin uses Barr too confidently, and a lexicographer of the stature of Frederick W. Danker, no less, disagrees with Martin's dismissal of etymology from the discussion. When synchronic usage fails us, we have to appeal to diachrony. Because ἀρσενοκοίτης is not attested prior to Paul, its etymology takes on a much greater importance than it otherwise would. Etymology joins both the literary context and the theological/historical context to provide the only evidences we have for the meaning of this word.

Etymology is not always misleading in the work of understanding compounds (see *playground*, *rattlesnake*, and *campfire*). It was one of the only tools first-century readers would have had at *their* disposal for understanding the word ἀρσενοκοίτης. A Koine Greek speaker hearing the word for the first time would have reacted, linguistically and perhaps emotionally, the same way you reacted the first time you heard the lexeme "motherf***er."²¹ You would never have put those words together, but once someone else did the compound was all too transparent.

VARIOUS CITATIONS

And indeed, this is precisely Danker's argument with regard to Greek. He offers two citations, one very early, of a form comparable to ἀρσενοκοίτης: μητροκοίτης [μήτηρ + κοίτη], which he renders as "one who has intercourse w. his mother." Another article Danker cites, David F. Wright's definitive

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ It is not to English speakers' credit that "motherf***er" is now common enough to mean "buddy." It has lost its shock and, arguably, its etymological meaning. But we know this because the lexeme is well attested, because we hear it and read it contexts in which it simply could not be taken literally. This is not true of the two appearances of ἀρσενοκοίτης in the NT, both of which are in vice lists. Etymology must be given its due weight here.

response to John Boswell, offers other examples of combining forms using -κοίτης:

- δουλοκοίτης – sleeping with slaves
- πολυκοίτος – sleeping with many others
- ἀδελφοκοιτία – sleeping with a sibling²²

In none of these cases, Wright argues, does the first portion of the compound refer to the person doing the “sleeping” but rather to the object, the person being slept with: δουλοκοίτης is one who sleeps with slaves, not a slave sleeping with others.

This list is important, because though Boswell admits that “in this and other compounds [-κοιται] corresponds to the vulgar English word ‘f[***]er,’ a person who, by insertion, takes the ‘active’ role in intercourse,”²³ he argues that the relationship of ἄρσεν- to -κοίτης is “ambiguous.” He argues that, “in bald English the compound means ‘male f[***]ers,’ but it is not clear whether ‘male’ designates the object or the gender of the second half.”²⁴

Boswell makes an analogy to “ladykiller.” Does it refer to a man who charms women easily, a *ladykiller*, or to a female assassin, a *lady killer*? Boswell adduces examples of Greek compounds in which the first and second halves bear different relationships. But he never mentions any using -κοίτης, -κοιτέω, or -κοιτία. By citing μητροκοίτης as a parallel and mentioning Wright’s article, Danker is disagreeing with Boswell, one of the major revisionist players in the debate over Christian views of homosexuality.²⁵

An analogy to English—a strategy Boswell uses—is worthwhile, because in a language in which (oh how odd it feels to type this, but it must be done) *motherbedder*, *slavebedder*, and *brotherbedder* are available lexemes—if hopefully uncommon ones—then the coinage of *unclebedder* is semantically constrained. It is unlikely to mean, an uncle who, by insertion, takes the active role in intercourse. The uncle in this case is the object, not the subject,

²² “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἄρσενοκοίται,” *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June, 1984), 130.

²³ Boswell, op. cit. 342.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ I use the word “revisionist” advisedly; it is the term used by James Brownson

of the bedding. At the very least, the latter sense would have to be demonstrated by usage—and a neologism, by definition, has none.

OTHER CITATIONS

The citations section is otherwise thin, not mainly in length but in depth. Simply put, it appears that early users of this word assumed their readers' knowledge of its meaning, offering little help by way of contextual redundancies. It appears in several vice lists beyond the New Testament, Danker notes, including the obscure Jewish-Christian (?) Sibylene Oracles of the second- to third-centuries A.D. and the Acts of John.

Even when Bardesanes (in a series of fragments reported by Eusebius) uses the word, he does not provide much context. In the middle of a long list of observations about different cultures, he says,

From the river Euphrates, and as far as the Ocean towards the East, he who is reviled as a murderer, or a thief, is not at all indignant: but he who is reviled for sodomy [ἀρσενοκοίτια] avenges himself even to the death: among the Greeks, however, even their wise men are not blamed for having favourites.²⁶

Such a citation is of little help to any “side” in the debate over ἀρσενοκοίτης. If “having favourites” means (as it appears) some sort of pederasty, then this citation still leaves unclear whether ἀρσενοκοίτια equals pederasty or includes it.

LEVITICUS 20:13

Martin thinks the etymology of ἀρσενοκοίτης is irrelevant; Boswell's view, in contrast, is that “the first half of the compound (ἀρσενο-) denotes not the object but the gender of the second half (-κοίται).”²⁷ Danker disagrees with both of them for different reasons, making precisely the argument Wright does²⁸: he cites Leviticus: “Compare the association of ἄρσιν and κοίτη in Lev 20:13.”

This is a key plot movement in the story of this much-fought-over Greek word, because if there's a genuine connection between Leviticus 20 and

²⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Evangelicae Praeparationis Libri XV*, ed. E. H. Gifford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 298–299.

²⁷ Boswell, 342.

²⁸ Wright says of Boswell's statement, “This is patently not the case if the LXX of the verses in Leviticus lies behind ἀρσενοκοίται, whether in encouraging the formation of the word itself or in informing its meaning.” “Homosexuals or Prostitutes?”, 129.

Paul’s usage of ἀρσενοκοίτης, we receive important added information about the word’s meaning.

This is how Leviticus 20:13 reads in the Septuagint (cf. Lev. 18:22, which is quite similar),

ὅς ἂν κοιμηθῆ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικός, βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμφότεροι,
θανατούσθωσαν, ἔνοχοί εἰσιν

Whoever lies with a male in sexual intercourse as with a woman, they have both committed an abomination; let them be executed; they are guilty.²⁹

The slightly difficult Hebrew explains the slightly awkward Greek at the beginning of the sentence: the syntactic relationship the words κοίτην γυναικός bear with the foregoing is hard to ferret out. The seventy appear to have translated very literally³⁰:

וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת־זָכָר מִשְׁכַּבֵּי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה עָשׂוּ

In painfully literal English, that could be translated,

And if a man lies with a male [as in] beds of a woman, he has done abomination.

But the semantic relationship here is clear (cf. similar usage of the Hebrew phrase in Judges 21:12), and the modern translations get it right: “if a man lies with a male *as one lies with a woman*...”

This brief foray into the intricacies of LXX translation serves a purpose, namely to suggest that that slightly awkward Greek—including a noun form of κοίτη—may make it more likely that Paul was alluding to or echoing Leviticus when he coined/used the word ἀρσενοκοίτης. Ἄρσενος and κοίτην are right there in the verse, right next to each other. Paul—or, again, some other early Jewish and/or Christian writer—put them together.

²⁹ Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Le 20:13.

³⁰ Though, interestingly, the LXX gives a “dynamic” rendering of “their blood will be on them”: “they are guilty.”

The connection between Paul's new word and Leviticus 20 has been observed for at least 150 years. Danker also cites E. A. Sophocles' *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*,³¹ which defines ἀρσενοκοίτης using the language of Leviticus 20:13:

See Sophocles Lex.: ἀ.= ὁ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοιμώμενος κοίτην γυναικείαν= "one who has intercourse w. a man as w. a woman")

This intertextual connection is also one of the major planks in the argument of Robert A. Gagnon, the current champion of the traditional viewpoint on homosexuality in Scripture.³²

What possible reason would a former Pharisee—who still called himself a Pharisee after his conversion (Acts 23:6)—have for coining/using a brand new word that *narrowed* the OT proscription of homosexuality to apply to only exploitative forms of the practice? If he expected that to be a hint, or a trajectory, or a full-blown reversal of the OT, he would owe us a great deal more explanation.

DEFINITION, GLOSS, AND BIBLICAL CITATION

Danker now turns to a definition of ἀρσενοκοίτης. He writes,

a male who engages in sexual activity w. a pers. of his own sex, *pederast* 1 Cor 6:9

There are three major pieces of information in this line: 1) the definition, 2) the gloss, and 3) the scriptural citation—the first and primary one Danker offers.

³¹ New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1870.

³² *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). Gagnon observes, "What kind of same-sex intercourse would have hurdled the obstacle of Lev 18: 22 and 20: 13 in Paul's mind? Surely none since these prohibitions speak generically of all men who have sexual intercourse with any and every kind of male." (Kindle loc. 5644) Gagnon also argues that ἀρσενοκοίτης must be defined consistently with Paul's discussion of "men with men burning with lust for one another" in Romans 1:24–27. David F. Wright, in an article cited in the BDAG entry for ἀρσενοκοίτης, says, "The heart of my argument is that the inspiration for the neologism ἀρσενοκοιτης lies in the Greek of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 LXX." "Translating ΑΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΑΙ (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41:4, 1987, 396. The argument is used throughout conservative and popular level literature on the topic. See Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 64.

DEFINITION

The definition is perfectly consistent with Danker's argument up to this point. It is general, applying to all homosexual sexual contact between males, whether exploitative or consensual.

GLOSS

But the gloss is a bit of a surprise. *Pederast* is an artful choice, because it is ambiguous in English (as in French and German): it can mean "male homosexual" or it can mean what its etymology points toward: a "boy-lover" (παῖδος + ἐράστης).

In contemporary American English the latter sense has taken over.³³ *Pederast* is still an appealing gloss, however, both because there is a little room in it for the generic sense of "homosexual" (one not involving boys), and because the *pederast* is always the active partner in a homosexual encounter.

SCRIPTURAL CITATION

And that fact, in turn, points to the first mention of another key argument in Danker's entry for ἀρσενοκοίτης, namely his prominent citation of 1 Corinthians 6:9. Yes, it is possible that the only other use of ἀρσενοκοίτης in the NT—1 Tim. 1:10—was left for later because it is generally regarded as deutero- or pseudo-Pauline; but there is a more significant reason why 1 Cor 6:9 is cited here.

That is that of 1 Tim 1:10 provides little in the way of contextual clues—semantic redundancies or antonymies—by which to discern what ἀρσενοκοίτης means. Danker is indicating here (as he will make explicit in a moment) that the pairing with μαλακός is a clue to the meaning of ἀρσενοκοίτης.

³³ Merriam-Webster, American Heritage, and New Oxford American Dictionaries all agree. They do not even offer a sense 2 for generic "homosexual." The (British) Oxford English Dictionary does, however, acknowledge an additional, "wider sense (chiefly derogatory): a man who practises anal intercourse; a male homosexual." It does adduce at least one use in which "Paedarast" is set in contradistinction to "Sapphist," as well as a few other historical uses which support their conclusion. But those tend to be older, and given that the term "homosexual" is first adduced (in the OED) in 1892, it makes sense that "pederast" would have been used before then to fill a space later filled by "homosexual."

DEALING WITH OBJECTIONS

We will return as Danker does to the importance of 1 Cor. 6:9. First, however, Danker deals with an implicit objection to his view as expressed so far:

On the impropriety of RSV's 'homosexuals' [altered to 'sodomites' in the NRSV] see [the following two articles]...

Why would Danker not only choose “pederast” but object to “homosexuals” as a gloss for ἀρσενοκοίτης? The two major article citations here reveal why: Danker thinks “homosexual” is an anachronism, that “sexual orientation” is a comparatively recent invention whose (psychologized? medicalized?) overtones do not belong in the New Testament.

He first cites [an article by William Petersen](#), who takes issue with John Boswell's definition of ἀρσενοκοίται as “active male prostitutes”—but who doesn't like David F. Wright's “imprecise” suggestion of “homosexuals” either. He says “homosexuals” is “unacceptable.”

Petersen proposes instead an etymological/literal rendering of ἀρσενοκοίται: “the ones (masc.) who lie/sleep with men.” He argues that

Both in Classical and Roman antiquity, male sexuality was regarded as polyvalent. There were an infinite number of options, any number of which might be pursued serially or simultaneously. A man might be, variously, a husband (άνηρ), a frequenter of prostitutes (πορνοκοπος), a lover of another man or young man (εραστής), a lover of youths (παιδεραστής), and/or an adulterer (μοιχος). While individual tastes might vary, virtually the total spectrum of known sexual behaviour, with the exception of transvestism, was acceptable (with varying degrees of enthusiasm on the part of the chronicler, of course). Thus, a man could be characterized sexually only by describing his sexual acts: man A is άνηρ και πορνοκοπος; man B is άνηρ και πορνοκοπος και εραστής; man C is πορνοκοπος και εραστής.³⁴

Christianity, Petersen says, took over Jewish moral categories but split sexual behavior into “natural” and “unnatural.” But Petersen insists that

³⁴ William Petersen, “Can Αρσενοκοίται Be Translated by ‘Homosexuals’?” *Vigiliae Christianae* 40:2, 1986, 188.

these new labels were, perforce, applied on the basis of acts, just as the earlier Greco-Roman labels had been. Thus, within both pagan and Christian antiquity, no categories of “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals” existed; indeed, such categories would not have made sense.³⁵

Petersen approvingly quotes Kenneth Dover’s classic work on Greek homosexuality,

The Greeks were aware...that individuals differ in their sexual preferences, but their language has no nouns corresponding to the English nouns “a homosexual” and “a heterosexual,” since they assumed that virtually everyone responds at different times to both homosexual and to heterosexual stimuli.³⁶

It was only in 1869 that a Hungarian physician coined the term “homosexual” to describe someone who “erotically oriented to their own sex” (Petersen's summary) from birth.

“Homosexuals,” then, Petersen says,

fails as a translation for it violates historical and linguistic fact by attempting to read a modern concept back into antiquity, where no equivalent concept existed. Once that error has been committed, the inaccuracies multiply exponentially: e.g., (1) the translation is inaccurate because it includes celibate homophiles; (2) it incorrectly excludes heterosexuals who engage in homosexual acts; (3) it incorrectly includes female homosexuals.³⁷

I think Petersen is basically correct (except for his point about celibate homophiles: even desires for sin are sinful³⁸); his point about incorrectly including lesbians in the scope of ἀρσενοκοίται is especially well taken.

But I think Petersen and Danker are both wrong to reject—and Wright is right to accept—the rendering of “homosexuals” in 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10.

Danker gives space in his entry to allow Wright to respond to Petersen, and Wright makes what is for me the decisive point: that while “homosexual”

³⁵ Petersen, 188.

³⁶ *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1 n.1.

³⁷ Petersen, 189.

³⁸ See Denny Burk, “[Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?](#)” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 58:1 (2015), 95–115.

may have been coined to speak of an orientation, it is now commonly used to refer to the category of people who both have the orientation and engage in the acts, a usage that “combines the references to propensity and activity.”³⁹ Contemporary English does not have a word which specifies the act as opposed to the desire. The difference between the two, if a Bible teacher or translator feels it necessary to communicate that distinction, is better left for a footnote, an article, a lecture, or a sermon.

Using the word “homosexual” in an English Bible translation could possibly be misleading, but I believe that for the purposes for which most Bible translations exist, the benefits of perspicuity—everybody knows the word “homosexual”—outweigh the risks of anachronism.⁴⁰⁴¹

BACK TO THE SCRIPTURAL CITATION

Danker needed to defend his choice of the gloss *pederast*, and for that he looked to Petersen—though he let Wright have his say, too.

Now he can get back to the main flow of his discussion; its next step is to elucidate the role of 1 Cor 6:9. Danker writes,

Of one who assumes the dominant role in same-sex activity, opposite *μαλακός*

This, again, is an argument, not merely a citation. Danker believes that the fact that *ἀρσενοκοίτης* is set next to (and apparently *opposite* to) *μαλακός* actually indicates that the former word refers to the man taking the dominant role in a homosexual encounter, the latter to the man in the passive role.

³⁹ Wright, *op. cit.*, 396.

⁴⁰ More specialized translations such as the NET Bible can be a little more prolix and intellectually demanding, translating *μαλακοι και αρσενοκοιται* as “passive homosexual partners [and] practicing homosexuals.”

⁴¹ Danker also comments that the “REB’s rendering of *μαλακοι οὔτε ἀρσενοκοίται* with the single term ‘sexual pervert’ is lexically unacceptable.” I have no access to the REB’s explanations for this translation choice, so I cannot reflect on it. Dale Martin, however, places the REB’s rendering among those translations which “combine both [*μαλακοι* and *αρσενοκοιται*] and offer the modern medicalized categories of sexual, or particularly homosexual, ‘perversion’ (RSV 1946, TEV 1966, NEB 1970, REB 1992).” He sees the REB as guilty of a specific kind of anachronism.

Μαλακός, as opposed to ἀρσενοκοίτης, is a well attested word outside and before the NT—though, like ἀρσενοκοίτης, it occurs in this sense only in an NT vice list. It means “soft,” and, by extension, it developed the well-established sense of “effeminate.” The LXX has only the one sense: “A soft tongue breaks a bone” (Prov 25:15). The NT has both: “a man dressed in soft clothing” (Matt 11:8; Luke 7:25) and 1 Cor. 6:9. Danker and other lexicographers (Louw–Nida, Swanson, Moulton–Milligan, Balz–Schneider, Thayer, etc.) all agree, and many offer the added specific word *catamite* as a possible gloss.

But Dale Martin does not agree, and Danker respectfully gives him a protest vote by citing his influential chapter, “Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences,” in the book *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality*.⁴²

Martin argues that setting ἀρσενοκοίτης against μαλακός does not demand that ἀρσενοκοίτης mean “homosexual.” He alleges that μαλακός means “effeminate”—that all passive partners in homosexual acts were considered μαλακοὶ in the ancient Hellenistic world, but that not all people who were μαλακοὶ allowed themselves to become the passive partners in homosexual acts. In other words, “effeminate” is a broad *cultural* category of which catamites were only one member.

I find this portion of Martin’s argument compelling; not so the next portion. Martin tries to to have his cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, he says,

We have very few uses of *arsenokoités* and most of those occur in simple lists of sins, mostly in quotations of the biblical lists, thus providing no explanation of the term, no independent usage, and few clues from the context about the term's meaning.⁴³

But Martin actually leans very heavily—too heavily—on the place of ἀρσενοκοίται precisely within vice lists. He says it is more likely to be grouped with sins of economic exploitation than to be grouped with sexual sins.

⁴² Ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: WJK, 1996), 117–36.

⁴³ Martin, *op. cit.*, no page nos.

We should assume that *arsenokoitein* here refers to some kind of economic exploitation, probably by sexual means: rape or sex by economic coercion, prostitution, pimping, or something of the sort.⁴⁴

However, even going by just the evidence he adduces, his readings are unconvincing. In every case, the meaning “homosexuals” fits quite well. There is never a moment of “linguistic anomaly,” such as when someone says, “That’s a great bicycle, but it has only two wheels.”

For example, the first citation he gives is to a Sibylene Oracle (in a translation by J. J. Collins):

(Never accept in your hand a gift which derives from unjust deeds.)
Do not steal seeds. Whoever takes for himself is accursed (to generations of generations, to the scattering of life.
Do not *arsenokoitein*, do not betray information, do not murder.) Give one who has labored his wage. Do not oppress a poor man. Take heed of your speech. Keep a secret matter in your heart. (Make provision for orphans and widows and those in need.)
Do not be willing to act unjustly, and therefore do not give leave to one who is acting unjustly.⁴⁵

In order to make this citation fit his hypothesis that *arsenokoitein* is economically exploitative sex, he has to posit that “do not betray information” and “do not murder” deal with economic exploitation, too. This is patent special pleading. Every example he gives is like this. Martin did serious enough work to merit a mention in BDAG, but his work simply fails to convince.

BIBLICAL AND OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN CITATIONS:

The main course of Danker’s argument is done. He dutifully notes the appearance of ἀρσενοκοίτης in Polycarp to the Philippians 5:3 , but since Polycarp is merely quoting 1 Corinthians 6, he is of little help.

Danker does believe that Romans 1:27, though it never uses the word ἀρσενοκοίτης, is relevant to the discussion of the word as it appears in 1

⁴⁴ Martin, *op. cit.*, no page nos.

⁴⁵ In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), no page nos.

Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, but he makes no comment other than “compare Romans 1:27.”

He also present a cultural note which is of uncertain relevance to the interpretation of ἀρσενοκοίτης in the NT: “Romans forbade pederasty with free boys in the Lex Scantinia, pre-Cicero.”⁴⁶

He also offers some final cultural comments before closing out the piece with a bibliography:

Paul’s strictures against same-sex activity cannot be satisfactorily explained on the basis of alleged temple prostitution.

In other words, that would be too narrow a way to understand ἀρσενοκοίτης.

Neither, Danker says, can Paul’s words be “limited to contract with boys for homoerotic service.” He cites a substantive article by David F. Wright which we have already discussed.⁴⁷

Then Danker coasts to a stop by reiterating the very first citation in this entry, the Bardasanes quotation which shows “condemnation of the practice [of pederasty] in the Euphrates region.”

I will not canvas the discussion in all the books Danker lists; that would stretch this article beyond all reasonable limits. Suffice it to say that Danker cites the major influential books then available on the debate, but because conservatives have only recently been forced to view biblical proscriptions of homosexuality as debatable, they did not write book-length treatments of the topic and therefore do not appear in Danker’s list (Gagnon’s landmark work came out just after BDAG itself did).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ I cannot discern the function this point plays in Danker’s argument.

⁴⁷ “Homosexuals or Prostitutes,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38:2, 1984, 125–53.

⁴⁸ Danker also cites the *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, as he always does, pointing readers to the ἄρσην entry, which defines ἀρσενοκοίτης as “pederaste”—which in French can mean either “homosexual” or (the more specific) “pederast.”

CONCLUSION

One of the reasons that Danker's work is so beloved by conservatives⁴⁹ is actually that Danker worked like a modernist: his work shows that he believed that you could get truth out of the proper application of linguistic method. The books and articles that Danker cites are largely modernist as well. And he makes an empirical argument (which mirrors perfectly that of conservatives elsewhere):

1. If arsenokoites is a neologism, a Pauline coinage, then it is appropriate to look in part to etymology to discover its meaning.
2. If it is appropriate to look to etymology then it is appropriate to enter Paul's Jewish, Pharisaic worldview and appeal to the use of ἀρσην and κοίτη in Lev 20:13.
3. Ἀρσενοκοίτης is set in contradistinction to μαλακός in one of its two NT uses, namely that of 1 Cor 6, so it means "men-bedders," the active partner in a male homosexual encounter.

The one exception to the modernism club in Danker's entry was the chapter by gay Yale religion professor Dale Martin. He tried gamely to offer a modernist argument, but perhaps (?) even he sensed its weakness, its special pleading. For he soon pulled out his postmodern sword. And he swung right for the conservative jugular (and the remainder of the Puritan canopy):

My goal is not to deny that Paul condemned homosexual acts but to highlight the ideological contexts in which such discussions have taken place. My goal is to dispute appeals to "what the Bible says" as a foundation for Christian ethical arguments. It really is time to cut the Gordian knot of fundamentalism. And do not be fooled: any argument that tries to defend its ethical position by an appeal to "what the Bible says" without explicitly acknowledging the agency and contingency of the interpreter is fundamentalism, whether it comes from a right-wing Southern Baptist or a moderate Presbyterian.⁵⁰

I appreciate it when people think clearly enough to advert to their epistemological controls, their critical foundations. I think it is a rare gift in a world in which most educated people seem to hold tightly to moral relativism and scientific absolutism at the same time, but fail ever to look

⁴⁹ See Rod Decker's effusive praise at http://ntresources.com/blog/?page_id=2526.

⁵⁰ Martin, op. cit., no page nos.

down at what they're standing on. I genuinely admire Martin's clarity of thought:

The test for whether an interpretation is Christian or not does not hang on whether it is historically accurate or exegetically nuanced. The touchstone is not the historically reconstructed meaning in the past, nor is it the fancifully imagined, modernly constructed intentions of the biblical writers. Nor can any responsible Christian—after the revolutionary changes in Christian thought in the past twenty years, much less in the past three hundred—maintain that Christian interpretations are those conforming to Christian tradition. The traditions, all of them, have changed too much and are far too open to cynical manipulation to be taken as foundations for gauging the ethical value of a reading of scripture.⁵¹

Frequently when I hear people speak this way, they fail to offer anything in the place of the fundamentalism against which they're inveighing—which generally means they're trying to misdirect your attention from the particular fundamentalism they're trying to sneak in through the back door (a fundamentalism they themselves, again, don't see). But Martin is too good a thinker to let this happen (yet):

The only recourse in our radical contingency is to accept our contingency and look for guidance within the discourse that we occupy and that forms our very selves. The best place to find criteria for talking about ethics and interpretation will be in Christian discourse itself, which includes scripture and tradition but not in a "foundational" sense. Nor do I mean that Christian discourse can itself furnish a stable base on which to secure ethical positions; it is merely the context in which those positions are formed and discussed. Conscious of this precarious contingency, and looking for guiding lights within the discourse, I take my stand with a quotation from an impeccably traditional witness, Augustine, who wrote: "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all" (*Christian Doctrine* 1.35.40).⁵²

This is what can only be called pulpit-pounding. Martin is aware of contingencies aplenty, but he still takes his stand! And who can complain when he takes his stand with Augustine and, by extension, with Jesus' Great Commandments in Matthew 22? Augustine's quote is justly famous; his are world-important words. Reading is a moral activity in which our loves for God and neighbor need to be right if we hope to read responsibly and faithfully. Making love one's fundamental is good, not bad.

⁵¹ Martin, *op. cit.*, no page nos.

⁵² Martin, *op. cit.*, no page nos.

But Martin, having thus far thought carefully, still cannot help sneaking in a more expansive fundamentalism than the one he just adverted to. He assumes a very controvertible view of love:

By this light, any interpretation of scripture that hurts people, oppresses people, or destroys people cannot be the right interpretation, no matter how traditional, historical, or exegetically respectable. There can be no debate about the fact that the church's stand on homosexuality has caused oppression, loneliness, self-hatred, violence, sickness, and suicide for millions of people. If the church wishes to continue with its traditional interpretation it must demonstrate, not just claim, that it is more loving to condemn homosexuality than to affirm homosexuals. Can the church show that same-sex loving relationships damage those involved in them? Can the church give compelling reasons to believe that it really would be better for all lesbian and gay Christians to live alone, without the joy of intimate touch, without hearing a lover's voice when they go to sleep or awake? Is it really better for lesbian and gay teenagers to despise themselves and endlessly pray that their very personalities be reconstructed so that they may experience romance like their straight friends? Is it really more loving for the church to continue its worship of "heterosexual fulfillment" (a "nonbiblical" concept, by the way) while consigning thousands of its members to a life of either celibacy or endless psychological manipulations that masquerade as "healing"?⁵³

Martin scores some points here; "heterosexual fulfillment" is not the calling of every Christian, and there are indeed psychological manipulations which masquerade as healing. I also, along with all the serious evangelical writers on this topic, weep with those with weep: I feel the pain of the teenager who struggles against desires that part of him wishes he didn't have. I have several friends who have lived Christian lives of celibacy for this reason, and they carry a heavy cross. And Christians ought to show very practical love to AIDS sufferers.

But Martin begs the question: what, indeed, counts as "hurt," "oppression," or "destruction"? Our society disagrees, so who decides? Sometimes the lizard on your shoulder whispering sweet, lustful nothings has to be killed—and boy does it hurt—in order for you to ride further up and further into Aslan's kingdom. (Sorry for mixing up two C.S. Lewis stories; the images of heaven in *The Great Divorce* and *Narnia* are clearly related.) We are a whole society of people who have decided not only to listen to the

⁵³ Martin, *op. cit.*, no page nos.

lizard and follow his dictates, but to let the lizard speak for us, to let him constitute our respective (“expressive–individualistic”) identities. We are forced to go back to our Bibles to discover what counts as love and what counts as hurt.

When Robert Gagnon responds to postmodern, moralistic–therapeutic–deist thinking like Martin’s, he answered with the supreme proof text which needs to be ready on the lips of every Christian from now till our society picks a different self–destructive sin to lionize:

In contemporary society the command to love is often misconstrued as tolerance and acceptance. The concept is richer than that. True love “does not rejoice over unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor 13: 6)⁵⁴

If you love God as he truly is and your neighbors as they truly are before God, you won’t rejoice in the sin that is harming those neighbors. If you wish for a good society protected by a strong moral canopy, you will love your neighbor enough to humbly call him to repentance. You will use the truthful rhetorical tools at your disposal, including the arguments of an obscure lexicographer—“a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.”

⁵⁴ Gagnon, *op. cit.*, x.