

## THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATING ἈΡΣΕΝΟΚΟΙΤΑΙ AND ΜΑΛΑΚΟΙ IN 1 CORINTHIANS 6.9: A REASSESSMENT IN LIGHT OF KOINE GREEK AND FIRST-CENTURY CULTURAL MORES<sup>1</sup>

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The rendering of ἄρσενοκοῖται in 1 Cor 6.9 has been the source of much heated debate in recent years. A case in point is the July 2008 civil suit brought against Zondervan Publishing House by Michigan attorney Bradley Fowler, who called into question NIV's 1982 rendering of ἄρσενοκοῖται by the phrase "homosexual offenders." Fowler's claim is that the term "homosexual" does not accurately reflect what the apostle Paul was targeting. He argues that "the intent of the publisher was to design a religious, sacred document to reflect an individual opinion or a group's conclusions" rather than a scholarly decision.<sup>2</sup> His support is drawn from other translations published by Zondervan which have "sodomites" (NKJV, NRSV) and "abusers of themselves with mankind" (ASV, KJV, TNT) rather than "homosexual offenders."<sup>3</sup>

In 2001 the NIV translation committee changed "homosexual offenders" to "practicing homosexuals" (TNIV).<sup>4</sup> Several other translations did the same. The NLT translators changed the Living Bible's "homosexuals" to "men who practice homosexuality." ESV modified RSV's "sexual perverts" to "men who practice homosexuality." NET followed suit in 2005 with "practicing homosexuals."

But was this a step in the right direction? Some claim that adding the word "practicing" correctly excludes those who exhibit feminine gestures or struggle with same-sex attraction but don't act on it. Others maintain that a change from "offender" or "pervert" to "practitioner" is more a matter of political correctness

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1 This paper was presented in the Bible Translation section at the 2009 SBL national meetings in New Orleans.

2 Fowler filed suit against Zondervan in the U.S. Eastern District Court of Michigan, Southern Division. He also filed suit against Thomas Nelson. See Bradley L. Fowler v. Zondervan Publishing House, July 7, 2008, 1–9, <http://docs.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/michigan/miedce/2:2008cv12889/231727/1/0.pdf>. Fowler sought an apology and \$60 million in damages. He claimed that said inaccuracy was deliberate, causing him years of "anxiety, loss of sleep, appetite, self-esteem and the ability to re-establish any family bonds" (Fowler v. Zondervan, 2–3).

3 Fowler v. Zondervan, 1–2.

4 CEV had changed GNB's "homosexual perverts" to "practicing homosexuals" ten years earlier.

than the result of sound translation practice, since “adulterers” was not similarly changed to “practicing adulterers,” “idolaters” to “practicing idolaters,” and so on. For some, this change is tantamount to being soft on sin. Says one critic, “The TNIV obscures the seriousness of the judgement on homosexuals . . . by adding the word ‘practicing.’”<sup>5</sup> Others speak of a conspiracy on the part of the TNIV translators to water down “homosexual offenders” in order to make homosexuality more acceptable.<sup>6</sup>

The issue is ultimately a question of translation accuracy. Does ἄρσενοκοῖται refer to sexual predators, as “sodomites” in JB, NJB, NKJV, and NRSV suggests? Or does the Greek term have to do with same-sex consensual activity, as “practicing homosexuals” in TNIV, NET, NLT, and ESV indicates?<sup>7</sup> Does ἄρσενοκοῖται refer to those who are attracted to persons of the same sex, as “homosexuals” in NASB and HCSB supposes? Or does the Greek term single out specific offenses such as pedophilia or bestiality, as “homosexual perversion” in NEB and GNB and “sexual pervert” in RSV and REB imply?

The task of the translator is complicated by what one makes of the preceding Greek vice μαλακοί. The difficulties are reflected in the wide range of renderings: “Effeminate” (ASV, KJV, NASB), “catamites” (JB), “the self-indulgent” (NJB), “weaklings” (TNT), “homosexuals” (NKJV), “boy prostitutes (NAB), “male prostitutes” (NIV, NLT, NRSV, TNIV), “pervert” (CEV), and “passive homosexual partners” (NET).

Ultimately NT translators are constrained by the lexical range of Koine Greek, grammatical analysis, and first-century sexual practices. Therefore, examination of ἄρσενοκοῖται and μαλακοί in accordance with Hellenistic Greek usage, the syntax of the passage, and Greco-Roman cultural norms becomes the critical need.

### Ἄρσενοκοῖται

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor [ἄρσενοκοῖται] . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6.9-10 TNIV)

The first order of business is to analyze the word itself. Ἄρσενοκοῖται is a compound of ἄρσην, the word for an adult male, κοίτη, meaning “bed,” and the suffix -ται, which denotes a masculine plural agent.<sup>8</sup> Combined they translate

5 Terry Watkins, “TNIV & Homosexuality,” [http://www.av1611.org/kjv/tniv\\_homo.html](http://www.av1611.org/kjv/tniv_homo.html).

6 Benny C. Aker, “Do Modern Translations Dilute Biblical Pronouncements against Homosexuality?” <http://tnivtruth.blogspot.com/2007/04/do-modern-translations-dilute-biblical.html>.

7 Compare GNB “behaves like a homosexual.”

8 See ἄρσην (variant spelling ἄρρην) in Henry Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996): (1) *the male sex* (2) *masculine, strong; metaph. mighty*; also ἄρρην *male, of the male sex*, opposite θήλυς (*female*); substantively (τὸ ἄρσεν *(the) male sex* (Matt 19.4; Rev 12.5; Rom 1.27). See also κοίτη (1) generally *bed* (Luke 11.7); specifically *marriage bed* (Heb 13.4). For the suffix -της, see Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. and revised by Robert W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), §109.8.

“men who bed men,” a common first-century euphemism for sexual relations.<sup>9</sup> In comparable compounds -κοῖται has a verbal force with the first element of the compound specifying the object of the verbal action. This means that the Greek term ἀρσενοκοῖται refers to adult males who copulate with other adult males, as opposed to men who engage in intercultural intimacy or other external forms of mutual stimulation.<sup>10</sup> So ἀρσενοκοῖται should be translated “men who copulate with men” rather than “men who sleep around.”<sup>11</sup> This is exactly the language of Philo, who speaks of “Men [in Sodom] who *were mounting men*” (ἄνδρες ὄντες ἄρρεσιν ἐπιβαίνοντες; *On Abraham* 135–36).<sup>12</sup>

It is sometimes argued that because the compound ἀρσενοκοῖται does not appear prior to Paul, we really can’t determine its meaning. Yet, the uncompounded words in contexts having to do with same-sex relations are readily found.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the parallel with ἄρσενος κοίτην in Lev 18.22 and 20.13 is difficult to contest.<sup>14</sup>

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman (μετὰ ἄρσενος οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ κοίτην γυναικός); that is detestable. (Lev 18.22)

If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman (ὅς ἂν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικός) both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (Lev 20.13)

One can even go so far as to posit that Paul is drawing directly on these two Septuagintal texts. For the only time Paul uses ἄρσην is when he is recalling the Septuagintal term for “male.”<sup>15</sup> And the language of “males who bed males” appears in the Septuagint only in Lev 18.22 and 20.13.

Even if Paul was the first to compound ἄρσην and κοίτη, it is important to note that he coined other compounds whose meanings are undisputed. For instance, the second vice εἰδωλόλατραι—a compound of “idol” (εἶδωλον) and “divine worship” (λάτρεια)—also first appears in Paul’s writings. Yet, it is difficult to dispute its connection with the Old Testament commands prohibiting the worship of idols or understand it to mean anything else.<sup>16</sup>

9 Κοίτη (κεῖμα) is a euphemism for *sexual intercourse*; in the plural, for *sexual excesses, promiscuity, illicit affairs* (Rom 13.13); and idiomatically, κοίτην ἔχειν, literally “have bed,” i.e., *to have intercourse* (Rom 9.10). See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, κοίτη.

10 See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, κοίτη.

11 See Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *A Greek Grammar*, §109.

12 Ἄρσην is a variant spelling of ἄρσην. See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ἄρσην.

13 See, for example, Lev 18.22; 20.13; Num 31.17-18; Judg 21.11-12.

14 For further discussion, see David Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἀρσενοκοῖται (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 125–53. Compare *Anthologia Graeca Epigram* 9.686, where it is said that prefect Basil, who defeated the forces of Babylon, was not frightened of the barbarian “nor of men who share their beds with men” (οὐκ ἄρρενας ἀρσενοκοῖτας).

15 Rom 1.27; Gal 3.28; 1 Cor 6.9; 1 Tim 1.10; compare Gen 1.27; 5.2; 6.19-20; 7.2-3, 9, 16; 17.14, 23; 34.24). With few exceptions ἄρσην (or variant ἄρρην) is found only in the first seven books of the LXX.

16 See Friedrich Büchsel, “Εἰδωλόλατραι,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 2.379–80.

The compound ἄρσενοκοῖται is not without parallels. The same compound occurs in one of the vice lists of the *Sibylline Oracles*: “μη ἄρσενοκοῖτειν, do not betray information, do not murder . . .” (2.73). While one can debate whether this portion of the oracles pre- or post-dates Paul’s letters, it can be reasonably argued that both vice lists have their origin in the same Levitical prohibitions.

Some take issue with translating ἄρσενοκοῖται as “men who bed men,” claiming that Paul was targeting a mentor-student pederastic relationship said to be common in Greco-Roman educational circles. The claim, however, has several difficulties. Unlike today, same-sex relationships in antiquity were largely confined to the upper crust of Greek society. Also unlike today, it was considered an “honorable service” for a young Greek male student to be intimate with his male mentor. Plato recounts, “In our city [Athens] both [the mentor] loving some one and [the student] showing affection to one’s lover are held in highest honor” (*Banquet* 183–85). First-century Greek historian Plutarch confirms the practice: “When the boys reached the age of 12, they were favored with the society of lovers from among the reputable young men. The elderly men also kept close watch of them” (*Lycurgus* 17–18).

The affection was mutual. The mentor was “lover” (ἔραστής) and the student “beloved” (ἔρωμένος). Intimacy was limited to expressions of gratitude toward a mentor for making one “wise and good.” States Plato, “Only then and there and in no other case can a student honorably indulge his lover” (*Banquet* 184e). Overall, however, sexual indulgences were frowned upon. The student was to be loved for his beautiful mind, passionate intelligence, and noble character (*Lovers* 132a).<sup>17</sup> Chaste relationships were the norm. Plato comments, “He that counts bodily desire as secondary . . . with soul lusting really for soul, regards the bodily satisfaction of the body as an outrage, and, reverently worshipping temperance, courage, nobility and wisdom, will desire to live always chastely in company with the chaste object of his love” (*Laws* 836c-d). A mentor who “crave[d] the body rather than the soul,” was considered “dishonorable” (*Banquet* 183d-e). The same standard applied to the student. A student who used sexual favors to gain standing or money was deemed shameful (*Banquet* 184a).

Some think that ἄρσενοκοῖται are first century pedophiles. But, if this were the case, one would have expected Paul to use the familiar Greek term παιδεραστία—*lovers of boys*,<sup>18</sup> which had to do with men keeping young boys for their sexual pleasure. States Plato, “they are boy-lovers (παιδεραστοῦσι) and have no natural interest in wiving and getting children . . . a lover of boys (παιδεραστής) or the willing mate of a man (φιλεραστής)” (*Banquet* 192b).

Others suppose that ἄρσενοκοῖται has the meaning “abusers of males.” Yet this does not really fit the sexual grouping in 1 Cor 6.9, for it assumes that it is

17 Plato comments, “I entered the grammar school of the teacher Dionysius and saw there the young men [students] who are accounted the most comely in form and of distinguished family, and their lovers [teachers/mentors]. Now it chanced that two of the young people were disputing . . . about Anaxagoras [Ionian philosopher] or about Oenopides [geometer and astronomer] . . .” (Plato *Lovers* 132a; *Laws* 836a).

18 See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, παιδεραστία. The term does not appear anywhere in the Greek Bible.

not the act itself but its excess or “abuse” that is wrong. This would make “sexual immorality,” “idolatry” (or perhaps “cult prostitution”), and “adultery” equally acceptable as long as one did not overdo or abuse it. Certain English translations render ἀρσενοκοῖται as “abusers of themselves with men” (ASV, KJV, TNT), that is, men who prostitute themselves. But, while the term ἀρσενοκοῖται can be stretched to refer to those who pay for sex, it does not extend to those who provide sex (i.e., male prostitutes).

Ἀρσενοκοῖται, according to Paul, disqualifies one from “inheriting the kingdom of God.” The severity of the consequences requires a corresponding translation. Based on first-century usage, “homosexuals” would not be a dynamic equivalent translation. “Practicing homosexuals” catches the lifestyle component but not the specific activity that carries the disapprobation. “Perverts” is a bit too broad and “sodomites” a bit too restrictive. NCV’s “men who have sexual relations with other men” comes close. “Men who copulate with other men,” though not highly nuanced, best fits Greek and Jewish contemporary sensibilities. For Plutarch, “to consort with males (ἀπο τῶν ἀρρενῶν) whether without consent or with consent . . . is a completely ill-favored favor, indecent, an unlovely affront to Aphrodite” (*Dialogue on Love* 751D–752B). For Josephus, “Our [Jewish] laws . . . abhor the mixture of a male with a male (τὴν πρὸς ἄρρενας ἀρρένων ἐστύγηκεν) and if anyone does that, death is his punishment” (*Against Apion* 2.199).

Even if ἀρσενοκοῖται includes all forms of male-male sexual intimacy, Plato’s dictum would still apply:

If we were to follow in nature’s steps and enact that law which held good before the days of Laius [King of Thebes], we would declare that it is right to refrain from indulging in the same kind of intimacy with men and boys as with women, and offer as evidence the nature of wild beasts, pointing out how male does not touch male for this purpose, since it is unnatural. (*Laws* 836c)

## Μαλακοί

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers [οὔτε μαλακοί οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται] . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6.9-10 TNIV)

It is commonly argued that the meaning of ἀρσενοκοῖται in 1 Cor 6.9 is dependent on the prior term μαλακοί and therefore cannot be treated in isolation. This is easier said than done, however. For one, the masculine plural substantive μαλακοί appears only here in the Greek Bible. Then too, the meaning of the Greek adjective μαλακός is difficult to pin down. It ranges in meaning from “soft” and “delicate” to “weak” and “cowardly.”<sup>19</sup> Translations are therefore wide ranging. They include “catamites” (JB), “male prostitutes” (NIV, TNIV, NCV, HCSB NLT, NRSV), “boy

19 For the adjective μαλακός, see “The words of a whisperer are like soft (μαλακοί) morsels” (Prov 26.22); “With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft (μαλακός) tongue will break a bone” (Prov 25.15); “Why then did you go out? To see a man clothed in soft (μαλακός) clothing?” (Matt 11.8; Luke 7.25). See Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, μαλακός [1.] softness, delicacy, effeminacy [2.] want of patience, weakness.

prostitutes” (NAB), “effeminate” (ASV, KJV, NASB, Phps), “weaklings” (TNT, Luther), “perverts” (CEV) and “those who make women of themselves” (Darby). Some translations even render οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται with a single word: “homosexuals” (LB, NKJV), “men who practice homosexuality” (ESV), “sexual perverts” (RSV, REB), and “homosexual perverts/perversion” (GNB, NEB).

A common interpretation is that μαλακοὶ and ἀρσενοκοῖται denote the passive and active partners of a same-sex relationship. This is reflected in JB’s “catamites and sodomites” and NET’s “passive homosexual partners and practicing homosexuals.” A passive-active understanding is also reflected in Louw and Nida’s statement, “It is possible that ἀρσενοκοίτης refers to the active male partner in homosexual intercourse in contrast with μαλακός, the passive male partner.”<sup>20</sup>

One difficulty, however, is the lack of parallels in Paul’s day. Οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται is not the language of same-sex partners. “Lover” (ἐραστής) and “beloved” (ἐρωμένος) are the first-century terms. Moreover, ἐραστής and ἐρωμένος fought side by side on the battlefield, which hardly fits a passive-active pairing, the μαλακ- word group being used of those who lacked courage and strength. For example, “the Athenians’ ancestral boast in war,” states Demosthenes, “is to yield to none and conquer all, renouncing through indolence and cowardice (μαλακίαν) the deeds of their ancestors and the interests of their fatherland” (*Answer to Philip’s Letter* 11.22). Also, Plutarch comments that the soldiers of Lucius Vitellius were more experienced and used to hard work, whereas Roman Emperor Otho’s men “were soft” (μαλακοὶ ἦσαν), that is, they were not used to hard labor (*Otho* 5.5.1-3).

Nor was the “beloved” adolescent of the Greek mentor described as a μαλακός. This is because Greeks did not look on adolescents as “weak” or “soft.” Strength and courage were valued in adolescent and adult males alike. Xenophon contrasts those marked by “dainty elegance and wanton effeminacy” (οὐδὲ μαλακία θρυστομένου) with those who demonstrate “physical strength, manly courage and sobriety” (*Banquet* 8.1.8).

JB’s “catamites” (abused boys) and NAB’s “boy prostitutes” (exploited boys) do not readily fit a vice list that disqualifies one from inheriting God’s kingdom. Bishops’, Tyndale’s, and Luther’s “weaklings” doesn’t fit either. The common translation of μαλακοὶ as “the effeminate” (ASV, KJV, NASB, and Phps) is not much better, for it could be misunderstood to include unaffected feminine gestures and mannerisms. NJB’s “the self-indulgent” begs the question of the nature of the vice. Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary defines “self-indulgence” as “excessive or unrestrained gratification of one’s own appetites, desires, or whims.” But what exactly constitutes an excessive whim or desire? Would shopaholics or foodaholics be included? Such a translation surely results in more fog than clarity.

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20 J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988–1989), 1:§88.280. See also 1:§88.281: “As in Greek, a number of other languages also have entirely distinct terms for the active and passive roles in homosexual intercourse.” Unfortunately, substantiation is lacking.

*Μαλακοί* was used of men who affected to be women and attired themselves accordingly, making the translation “transvestites” a possibility. Cross-dressing was a cultural reality as early as the Canaanites. It motivated the Mosaic prohibition, “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this” (Deut 22.5 NIV). Transvestism was found in Greco-Roman artistic circles. A papyrus text dated 245 B.C. refers to a dancer from the theater district whose attire would be characterized as “feminine” rather than masculine: “Send me also Zenobius τὸν μαλακόν with a drum and cymbals and castanets, for he is wanted by the women for the sacrifice; let him wear as elegant clothing as possible” (*Hibeh Papyrus* 1.54.11).<sup>21</sup>

“Male prostitutes” (NIV, TNIV, NCV, HCSB, NLT, NRSV) is perhaps the most felicitous translation, for the term *μαλακοί* was used of those who played the part of a woman for pay or profit of some kind.<sup>22</sup> Pimps and male prostitutes were a social phenomenon in Paul’s day much as they are today. Demosthenes used the *μαλακ-* word grouping of Pausanias, “a whoremonger” (πόρνῳ), because, “although he swaggers like a man, he allows himself to be used like a woman; he . . . submits to degenerate” (*Letters* 4.11). Plato did the same: “Will they not likewise reproach that man who plays the woman’s part (τὴν μαλακίαν) with the resemblance he bears to his model?” (*Laws* 836e).

“Male prostitutes” also fits first-century cultural mores. Men of social standing regarded male prostitution as the ultimate act of human degradation. To do so was, in Greek opinion, to “stoop to the level of an animal.” This was true regardless of whether the sexual favors were motivated by money, public favor, or patronage. “Reproach” is what a “man who plays the woman’s part” (τὴν μαλακίαν) can expect. “Is there any man,” asks Plato, “who will ordain by law a practice like that? Not one, I should say, if he has a notion of what true law is” (*Laws* 8.836e). For “when male unites with female for procreation, the pleasure experienced is held to be due to nature. But males with males or females with females is against nature and an outrage of the first order” (*Laws* 636c).<sup>23</sup>

“Male prostitutes” and “men who copulate with men” would therefore be a plausible rendering for *μαλακοί* and ἀρσενοκοῖται, respectively. The grammar of 1 Cor 6.9 supports this. There is nothing that grammatically connects the two words. Granville Sharp’s rule does not apply. There is no single article uniting the two nouns as with τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους (“pastors-teachers” Eph 4.11). There is no correlative or other construction that pairs them—no οὐκ/οὐδε or οὐκ/καὶ as one finds in the οὐκ ἐνὶ δούλος οὐδὲ ἐλευθέρως (“neither slave nor free”) and the οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ (“not male and female”) constructions of Gal 3.28. It would therefore be wrong to construe the two nouns as paired in

21 See David Bain, “Two Submerged Items of Greek Sexual Vocabulary from Aphrodisias,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 117 (1997): 81–84.

22 “Prostitutes” would include all males (regardless of age or class) who used sexual favors to gain standing or money.

23 Plato’s language is identical to that of Paul’s in Rom 1.26-27; 1 Cor 6.9-10; and 1 Tim 1.10.

any way and would thus rule out passive and active partners—be they consensual, non-consensual, pederastic, or otherwise.

In conclusion, while “male prostitutes” renders *μαλακοί* in accordance with Koine Greek and first-century cultural mores, “practicing homosexuals” for *ἀρσενοκοῖται*, in my opinion, does not. It is not an issue of the practicing or non-practicing activities of those attracted to the same sex but of adult males who have intercourse with another adult male, whether consensual or non-consensual. This does not make those who translate *ἀρσενοκοῖται* as “practicing homosexuals” soft on sin. But it does produce a rendering that is less than felicitous to Hellenistic Greek usage and cultural mores. The lack of grammatical support for pairing *μαλακοί* and *ἀρσενοκοῖται* makes it important to abandon the anachronistic reading of 1 Cor 6.9 as passive and active partners in a same-sex relationship. NRSV’s “Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *male prostitutes*, *sodomites* . . .” and NCV’s “Do not be fooled. Those who sin sexually, worship idols, take part in adultery, those who are *male prostitutes*, or *men who have sexual relations with men* . . .”) are two modern translations that have most accurately captured the Koine and culture of Paul’s day.