
THE ABOMINATION QUESTION

What Leviticus 18:22 actually says — and what got lost in translation

The word translated "abomination" appears 116 times in the Old Testament. It describes shellfish, remarrying a divorced woman, and certain sacrifices. Here's what that means for you.

BEFORE WE START

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD THIS VERSE USED AS A VERDICT.

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."

— Leviticus 18:22 (ESV)

That word — *abomination* — lands like a verdict. Final, cosmic, irreversible. And it was used that way: at youth groups, in purity culture workbooks, in letters parents sent when their kid came out.

The problem is that the English word is doing significantly more work than the Hebrew word behind it. And understanding that gap doesn't require you to dismiss the Bible — it requires you to actually read it.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

- What *toevah* means in Hebrew — and what it doesn't
- The 116 other things also called *toevah* in the Old Testament
- The Hebrew word for moral evil — and why Leviticus doesn't use it here
- The Holiness Code context and what it changes
- What the scholarly consensus actually says

THE HEBREW WORD

toevah

תועבה · appears 116 times in the Old Testament

Here's what *toevah* is also used to describe in the Hebrew Bible:

LEVITICUS 11:11

Eating shellfish. Same word.

DEUTERONOMY 24:4

Remarrying a divorced woman. Same word.

DEUTERONOMY 17:1

Sacrifices with a blemish. Same word.

PROVERBS 11:1

Dishonest weights and measures. Same word.

Toevah is a category word for ritual or cultural impurity — things that would mark Israel as belonging to another nation's cult. It's a boundary marker for Israelite identity, not a universal moral verdict.

THE CRITICAL DISTINCTION

THERE'S A DIFFERENT WORD FOR MORAL EVIL. LEVITICUS DOESN'T USE IT.

toevah

USED IN LEVITICUS 18:22

Ritual or cultural impurity. A boundary marker. Things that would associate Israel with foreign cultic practices. Used 116 times.

shiqqutz

NOT USED IN LEVITICUS 18:22

Moral evil. Genuine wickedness. Used for idolatry in its most condemned forms. The word you'd use for something universally and deeply wrong.

These are different words. In a legal text understood to be divinely authored, the choice of word matters. The author of Leviticus 18 used *toevah* — the ritual impurity word — not *shiqqutz*, the moral evil word. That's a deliberate lexical choice.

"The same Hebrew word for abomination (toevah) is used in at least thirty-eight other passages in Scripture to refer to idolatrous practices... It signals a violation of Israel's covenant boundaries, not a universal moral category."

Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (1998)

THE CONTEXT YOU WEREN'T TAUGHT

LEVITICUS 18 IS PART OF THE HOLINESS CODE. MOST CHRISTIANS DON'T FOLLOW IT.

Leviticus 17–26 is a distinct section scholars call the **Holiness Code** — a set of laws governing Israelite religious and cultural identity. It includes:

- Prohibitions on eating certain foods
- Regulations about mixing fabrics and seeds
- Rules about bodily emissions and skin conditions
- Restrictions on approaching the altar
- Laws about agricultural practices

Most Christians do not follow these laws. The New Testament directly addresses whether Gentile Christians are bound by this code — Acts 15, Galatians 2, Colossians 2:16–17 — and the answer Paul gives is no.

That doesn't automatically resolve Leviticus 18:22. But a consistent hermeneutic has to grapple with why *this* law from the Holiness Code would be binding on Gentile Christians when the others aren't. That question deserves a better answer than "because it's obvious."

WHAT DO SCHOLARS ACROSS THE SPECTRUM ACTUALLY AGREE ON?

These positions span traditionalist and revisionist scholars. They appear in peer-reviewed journals, theological dictionaries, and major lexicons including HALOT (the standard Hebrew lexicon for Old Testament scholarship).

1

Toevah is a ritual and cultural impurity category, not an absolute moral category. The distinction between toevah and shiqqutz is recognized across the scholarly literature.

2

Leviticus 18 addresses a specific cultic context — Israel's differentiation from surrounding nations' practices. The Canaanite and Egyptian cult practices involved ritual same-sex acts in religious settings.

3

Applying Leviticus 18:22 universally requires interpretive work that most traditionalist treatments don't acknowledge. It's a hermeneutical choice, not a plain-reading conclusion.

KEY SOURCES

William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (2012) · Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (1998) · Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978) · HALOT (Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament) · Thomas Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow?* (1995) · Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (1983)

LEVITICUS IS ONE PASSAGE.

There are six more — and they all have the same problem. Translation choices made by committees. Word studies buried in lexicons. History that didn't make it into your Sunday school curriculum.

UNBOUND

A Scholar's Guide to the 7 Passages Used Against LGBTQ+ Christians

All seven passages. Word studies, historical context, translation history, and scholarly consensus for each one. Written to survive hostile reading — every claim is sourced. \$27.

WHATTHEYSKIPPED.COM →