

Zondervan's *Africa Bible Commentary* features an article on homosexuality by Nigerian author, Yusufu Turaki: *There is "no distinction between a homosexual person and a homosexual act . . . both are sinful."*

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**The Zondervan Session at SBL, Boston, November 2008**

*The Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars* was featured at the SBL 23-47 Session entitled *African Christianity: History and Future*, a session of the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL), held Nov. 21-25, 2008, in Boston, MA. The SBL session was presented by Zondervan Books.

**My first exposure to the *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2008**

Jose and I first viewed a copy of the *Africa Bible Commentary* in July of 2008 at the Anglican Cathedral of Nairobi, Kenya, where it was available for purchase and on display at a book table at the entrance of the church. At the November 2008 Society of Biblical Literature, I purchased a copy in the Exhibit Hall of book publishers.

**What follows is a critique of the *Africa Bible Commentary* article entitled "Homosexuality"**

In the section on Romans chapter 1, on page 1355 of the *Africa Bible Commentary*, an article entitled "Homosexuality" by Yusufu Turaki, occupies two-thirds of the page.

**(1) Unlike the evangelical "ex-gay" leaders of the Western world, Turaki totally denounces the homosexual as essentially sinful.**

Turaki refers to homosexuality as an "alternative lifestyle." He does not make use of, nor does he define, the term sexual orientation. He refers to homosexual "relationships" as "abnormal, unnatural and a perversion."

He makes no "distinction between a homosexual person and a homosexual act, as if the latter is sinful and the former is not. Both are sinful," he asserts. He argues for this on the basis that "homosexuality has deep roots in our sinful nature" and that "sin has affected all aspects of our inner being" so that it should not be "surprising that some people show a biological disposition towards homosexuality" in that "sin has warped every aspect of life."

At the outset of his article, Turaki shows that homosexuals believe they are a minority and that, according to the homosexual, society's "condemnation of homosexuality represents a denial of human rights." "In defense of this position, *they* [homosexuals]," he writes, "argue that homosexuality is a biological condition . . . genetically determined" (as if *only* homosexuals argue for this biological possibility).

It appears that Turaki is arguing that even if homosexuality were a "biological condition" or "genetically determined" or "a biological disposition" that the Christian church must reject the homosexual person as sinful even if this person never engages in same-sex activities. Even the evangelical "ex-gay" leaders of the Western world of the 1990s, that I have read, do not adopt this view. For example, Joe Dallas, Bob Davies & Lori Rentzel, and William Consiglio would make a distinction between the person who experiences "the temptation" to homosexual acts, and the person who actually engages in same-sex sex. The homosexual is not sinful because he or she experiences temptations to same-sex acts. Turaki does not make this distinction.

**(2) How the homosexual may hope to be delivered according to Turaki: Sectarian counseling, sexual denial, and isolation within the Christian community.**

Turaki's saving hope for the homosexual's same-sex attraction is "only Christ can provide deliverance." This "deliverance" must happen through "biblical counseling," the "surrender [of] their sexuality to Christ" and "to accept the help of fellow believers." Or, in other words, counseling that refuses to take into consideration secular studies on homosexuality, a complete denial of ones' sexuality as a gay person, and an isolated community experience of "fellow believers."

**(3) Turaki, an evangelical Bible scholar, openly rejects any secular studies on homosexuality that would challenge his foregone conclusion of what the Bible "clearly" teaches.**

Turaki, in forming his view on homosexuality, has judged all "human resources" on the study of homosexuality as invalid on the basis that "the Bible *clearly* [my emphasis] defines homosexuality as a sin." "Our views [on homosexuality]," he says, "should not be derived from human resources but from the Word of God." To support his view that homosexual "relationships are abnormal, unnatural and a perversion," Turaki feels he has only to quote passages from the Bible. Turaki cites Sodom and Gomorrah, two passages from Paul (I Corinthians 6:9-10; Romans 1:24-27), the male-female one-flesh principle as an example of the body of Christ (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:28-32), and that only heterosexuals can reproduce and therefore provide for a father-mother (adult male-female) home (Gen. 1:28; 9:7). What is clearly biblical to Turaki is becoming less and less clear to his evangelical counterpart scholars in the West like Jack Rogers, author of *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (2006). And Turaki's use of Sodom and Gomorrah, an account of attempted rape, has long been rejected by American evangelical "ex-gay" leaders themselves as a proof text against homosexuality. See Bob Davies & Lori Rentzel in their *Coming Out Of Homosexuality* (1993), p. 184, where they say "pro-gay theologians are correct in saying that this passage does not provide a strong argument against prohibiting all homosexual acts."

**(4) Turaki is silent on the intolerance of homosexuals in Africa and without critical remark when using the quote "homosexuals are worse than beasts."**

Turaki discusses the fact that the issue of homosexuality "has sparked much controversy in Africa." On one side of the issue there are "some politicians" who "have stated that homosexuals are worse than beasts." On the other side of the issue there is "Archbishop Tutu" who "has called for tolerance and an acceptance of homosexuality." Turaki observes that the "Anglican churches across the continent" have rejected Tutu's position. (Does Turaki mean to say that Anglicans should reject tolerance as well as acceptance?) It is striking to note that Turaki has no comment as to the response the Anglican churches should be giving, as well as himself, to African political leaders who say "homosexuals are worse than beasts."

**(5) Happily, it appears that Turaki would not subscribe to the idea common in Africa that homosexuality is imported from Western civilization.**

His article begins by defining homosexuality as "sexual attraction to or sexual relations with members of the same sex." In his opening sentence, he says homosexuality "has been around for a very long time in all societies." Evidently, Turaki would not subscribe to the idea which is held by many of his fellow Africans that homosexuality is an imported idea from the West and therefore, very un-African.

**(6) Only with negative examples of "coercion" does Turaki support his statement that "African tradition" is "varied" in its "practice of homosexuality."**

Turaki states that "African tradition" is "varied" in its "practice of homosexuality," that some African communities accept it, and other communities reject it. As if to illustrate, he immediately follows with a lengthy comment (relatively lengthy for such a short article) on "homosexual acts" that are entered upon by African "politicians, soldiers, prisoners and some professions" in order "to gain certain spiritual powers" as well as "political and social power." He categorizes these same-sex sex acts as a "quest for power" which "sets aside morality and ethics" and describes these as "coercive sexual relationships [that] are wrong." One could argue that Turaki is actually describing, in some cases, if not most cases, heterosexuals who compromise their own heterosexual orientation for some kind of personal gain. This is hardly a description of homosexuals. Without his stating it, Turaki is actually describing, in principle, what occurred in Gen. 19, that is, "a quest for power" and "coercive sexual relationships" which, of course, has nothing to do with same-sex loving relationships. Also, for illustrating varied African practices of homosexuality, is there nothing remotely positive? Why elaborate only with "coercive" practices?

**Conclusion: Turaki's Bible-study article on homosexuality serves to further the African church's homophobic intolerance of gay people, confirming and reinforcing already existing hateful and hurtful attitudes towards LGBT Africans.**

Turaki's article, "Homosexuality," in the *Africa Bible Commentary*, only enlarges the gap between the need for tolerance in Africa and the African church's failure to speak out against homophobic intolerance which often erupts into physical brutality, murder, unlawful imprisonment, loss of employment, estrangement and isolation from family, hate speech and hate crimes. The African evangelical community needs, at the very least, to speak out for tolerance and humane treatment of homosexuals.

**To summarize**, because of the very volatile African context in which his article will be read and understood, (a) Turaki's use of the words "abnormal, unnatural and a perversion" along with (b) his uncritical use of the quote that "homosexuals are worse than beasts" tied in with (c) his statement of the African Anglican church's rejection of Archbishop Tutu's call for tolerance, as well as (d) his one-sided account of African "coercive sexual relationships" as his example of "varied" African same-sex sex (Where is his account, under "African tradition," of same-sex African loving couples? -- this writer knows of some personally!), not to mention (e) an uncritical censorship of all views of homosexuality that are not in keeping with his views ("Our views of homosexuality should not be derived from human sources but from the Word of God"), and, finally, with (f) his expressed theological view that *to be* homosexual *is sinful*, this evangelical-Christian article can, therefore, only encourage the already strong, homophobic, hateful and dangerous rhetoric of the church in Africa where civilian and police brutality towards homosexuals is not uncommon.

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About Yusufu Turaki: **Nigerian. Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA)**. BTh in Theology (Igbaja Theological Seminary, Nigeria), MATS in Theology and Ethics (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Mass., USA), PhD in Social Ethics (Boston University, Mass., USA). At the time of publication of the *Africa Bible Commentary*, Turaki was Translation Consultant, International Bible Society.