

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

A Linguistic Study

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Of the New Testament passages which are cited to directly address the problem of homosexuality in the Church, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is both the most quoted and the least understood. A large part of the difficulty stems from the multitude of poor translation choices made regarding the two Greek words: **μαλακοὶ** (*malakoi*) and **ἀρσενικοῖται** (*arsenokoitai*). Since the first English translations, these two words have each been rendered in no less than 10 different ways, sometimes even being combined together to form a single word or phrase where two distinctly different words were actually intended. Indeed, as will be seen, in none of these cases are the translations faithful to the original Greek.

A fairly common translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 can be found in the *New Revised Standard Version*:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, **male prostitutes**, **sodomites**, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.¹

The NRSV renders **μαλακοὶ** as "male prostitutes" and **ἀρσενικοῖται** as "sodomites;" by comparison, the KJV translates these two key words as "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." In both cases, the choices here are wrong.

μαλακοὶ is used in the New Testament in only three places,² the first two being parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew it actually appears twice in one verse, and here the translators of the NRSV have rendered it correctly:

What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.³

If you're saying "but I don't see anything about *male prostitutes* or *effeminate* people here," you're correct. In Matthew, as well as in Luke, the word **μαλακοὶ** is correctly translated as the adjective

¹ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 *emphasis added*

² Matthew 11:8, Luke 7:25, and 1 Corinthians 6:9

³ Matthew 11:8

"soft" - as in "soft robes."

In fact, literally speaking **μαλακοι** means "soft." The soft feel of rich fabrics, comfortable pillows, an infant's skin, and delicate plants are all among the things that are commonly modified by the application of this word. This is the etymological meaning of the word in its root derivation, not an idiomatic interpretation or opinion. When, throughout Greek literature, it is used in its literal sense, "tactilely soft" is its meaning.⁴

Idiomatically, **μαλακοι** is used in ways that are generally related to the literal sense of the word. It is sometimes used to describe a freshly plowed field, or a gentle touch, or a weak, sick, or frightened person. When it is used in a musical context it sometimes conveys connotations of a feminine nature and could, to that extent only, be thought of as "effeminate." One of the most common idiomatic applications of **μαλακοι**, however, is its use in classical Greek literature to describe a character flaw; in this case it generally means "weak willed" or "easily beguiled" and, as such, constitutes a negative judgement. In this context it most likely describes an inability to uphold an individual sense of moral integrity and a general weakness of conviction.

Most linguistic scholars have concluded that this particular idiomatic meaning was the one most likely intended by Paul. It was a common idiom in the Koine Greek of his time, would not have been out of character for Paul to use in this way, and actually fits quite well into the context of these two verses of 1 Corinthians. Looking at the sequence of words in 6:9 reveals an alternation between terms relating sexual sin and words relating to religious or moral failings. Interpreting **μαλακοι** idiomatically allows for the alternation to proceed un-broken.

As for how **μαλακοι** might be translated into English, perhaps "weak willed," "wishy-washy," "namby-pamby," "lukewarm," "ethically flabby," or "morally insipid" would suffice. It certainly does *not* mean "male prostitute," and while "effeminate" might apply if the subject at hand were the quality of a musical piece, such is not the case here. Contextually, the meaning should coordinate with the surrounding passage and should make sense within that context. The above alternative terms enable such coordination.

ἀρσενοκοίται is used only twice in the New Testament,⁵ and also has the questionable distinction of being one of the few words in the Pauline vocabulary which is found nowhere else in

⁴ Henry George Liddell. Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940.)

⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

extant Greek literature. As a result, its literal meaning is difficult to determine; its etymological roots are "man-active-bed" or, perhaps, "lying-with-men," depending upon how you form the reconstructed roots. Since we have no other instances of its use anywhere in Greek literature, the question of its meaning beyond the bare bones of its etymology is wide-open for debate. For example, if **ἀρσενοκοῖται** refers to homosexuals why did Paul use such an obscure - indeed, otherwise unknown and possibly self-coined - term when there are multiple Greek words which were commonly used to describe various kinds of homosexual activity? For example, if homosexuality was intended, why did Paul not use the term **ἀρενοκοῖται** (*arenokoitai*), or "man-passive-bed," indicating a male who takes the inactive role sexually.

As for what **ἀρσενοκοῖται** actually means, there are several superior alternatives to the traditional translation of "homosexual" or "sodomite." It may, indeed, mean a male prostitute who takes the active role sexually, in which case what Paul would have been meaning was either a "hustler" or, more commonly, a "gigolo."

In short, while **ἀρσενοκοῖται** certainly references a form of sexual behavior, Paul's failure to use one of the common terms for general homosexual practice leads us to conclude that his intention is not general but, rather, specific. Just as the references to πόρνοι ("fornication") and μοιχοὶ ("adultery") are specific forms of sexual activity that violate the law, so also **ἀρσενοκοῖται** is a specific form of sexual activity that violates the law. Etymologically, it seems to reference a male who is sexually active in bed, which could just as easily reference a heterosexual male prostitute as a homosexual one. Perhaps the best translation for this word should simply be "male-prostitute," with the kind of male-prostitute being irrelevant (i.e., either kind would be abhorrent). This conclusion has the advantage of being in keeping with the context of both the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy passages, as well as refraining from introducing into the text material which simply isn't there.

A further possible meaning for this word may be understood from within the context of Greek culture: pederasty. While foreign to the twenty-first century western-mind, during the first century it was not considered unusual for an older, respected and established man to take a young teen-age boy as his sexual companion.⁶ **ἀρσενοκοῖται** might be understood as a reference to the older male pederast in such relationships, though this is by no

⁶ While not unusual, it was nevertheless a practice which was ridiculed by many pagan philosophers and writers of the time.

means certain from the context of the Biblical passage. Indeed, had this been Paul's meaning it seems rather more likely that he would have used one of the several Greek words or idioms that were then in common usage for the practice.

Yet another interesting, and certainly more possible, translation might be "rapist." A rapist definitely takes the active role in a sex act, and as such would better match the etymological meaning of the word.

In any case, it seems unreasonable to interpret the reference to ἀρσενοκοῖται here as a general condemnation of homosexuals. Rather, it should probably be understood as addressing homosexual prostitution, pederasty, or rape, all of which is highly objectional both in the Hebrew culture of Paul's time as well as our culture, today.

As for how a contextually accurate translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 might read, perhaps this may be as good as any:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, morally weak, gigolos, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.