Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy - **ISSN: 2971-5997 (Online)**
Volume 6, Issue 2 (July – December), 2026, pp. 88-99

Contextual Interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 among the People of Asaba, Nigeria

Peace Eseoghenne Awhire
Postgraduate Student
Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy
Delta State University, Abraka

Abstract
Leviticus 18:22 - "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" - remains one of the most contested texts in contemporary biblical hermeneutics, particularly in the global debate on homosexuality, human sexuality, and cultural identity. While Western scholarship has produced extensive exegetical and ideological readings of the text, ranging from universal moral prohibition to cultic-contextual limitation, little attention has been paid to how the text is understood and appropriated within indigenous African communities. This study examines the contextual interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 among the people of Asaba in Delta State, Nigeria. The study is situated within the framework of inculturation hermeneutics and reader-response theory, which affirms that every community reads the biblical text through its own cultural worldview. The Asaba people, culturally Igbo-speaking but historically situated within the Niger Delta borderlands, possess a robust traditional sexual ethic governed by concepts of *Omenala* (custom of the land), *Ani* (abomination/taboo), and *Nso Ani* (offence against the earth deity). The research asks: How do Asaba Christians, traditionalists, and community elders understand Leviticus 18:22? Does their indigenous concept of *Ani* correspond with the Hebrew concept of *to'ebah* (abomination)? And what implications does their interpretation hold for contemporary church teaching and pastoral engagement? Using a qualitative approach that combines historical-grammatical exegesis of Leviticus 18:22 and field-based methods including semi-structured interviews with clergy, traditional title holders, elders, and youth groups, as well as focus group discussions in selected quarters in Asaba (Umuaji, Umuonaje, and Cable Point), the study investigates the convergence and divergence between the Levitical prohibition and Asaba traditional morality. Preliminary findings suggest that among the Asaba, Leviticus 18:22 is not read as an isolated ancient Israelite cultic code but as an affirmation of an already existing indigenous moral order. Homosexual acts are categorized under *Ani*, an abomination that pollutes not just the individual but the land itself (*Ani*), requiring ritual cleansing. Thus, for most Asaba interpreters, the text retains a universal moral authority rather than a time-bound ceremonial law. However, younger, urban, and Pentecostal respondents demonstrate a more nuanced hermeneutic that distinguishes between the act, the person, and the contemporary human rights discourse. The study contributes to African biblical hermeneutics by demonstrating how a seemingly foreign Levitical text is domesticated within the Asaba worldview, and it provides a culturally grounded framework for the Church in Asaba to engage contemporary debates on sexuality without resorting to purely Western liberal or conservative paradigms.

Keywords: Leviticus 18:22, Asaba, Contextual Interpretation, *To'ebah*, *Ani*, Homosexuality, Inculturation Hermeneutics, African Biblical Interpretation

Introduction

It is indubitable that the Bible has been interpreted in different ways, at different times, and in different contexts. This is because people read the Bible from within their own social, cultural and religious settings. A biblical passage that was written in ancient Israel may therefore raise different questions when it is read in present-day Africa. This does not mean that the meaning of the Bible should be misappropriated to suit modern society. Rather, it means that the interpreter needs to understand both the original setting of the biblical text and the setting of the people who are reading it. This is the concern of contextual biblical interpretation. African

biblical scholars have given serious attention to the importance of context in biblical interpretation. Adamo (2015) referred to it as African Cultural Hermeneutics (ACH), which takes African worldviews, cultures and life experiences seriously in the interpretation of the Bible. He argues that biblical interpretation is always done within a particular context. In the same way, Nyiawung (2013) argues that the African context can contribute to a better understanding of biblical texts. For him, African biblical interpretation should bring together the historical context of the biblical text and the present context of the African reader. Chukwuka (2022) also maintains that both the context of the biblical text and the context of the person receiving or interpreting the text are important in the hermeneutical process.

This issue is important in the interpretation of Leviticus 18:22. This passage is one of the most discussed texts in the Bible in relation to sexual morality. The verse contains a prohibition concerning sexual relations between the same sexes, males in particular. However, understanding the verse requires more than reading the sentence by itself. It is part of Leviticus 18, a chapter that contains several laws concerning sexual behaviour and the moral life of the Israelites. The chapter also speaks about the practices of other peoples and warns Israel not to follow them.

Leviticus 18:22 has been interpreted differently by scholars and religious communities. Some interpreters understand the passage as a clear prohibition of male same-sex sexual relations. Others pay greater attention to the social, religious and cultural setting in which the law was given. These emphases show why the historical and literary contexts of the passage is important. A responsible interpretation would first ask what the text meant within its original setting before asking how it should be understood in another cultural setting. This hermeneutical principle becomes imperative when Leviticus 18:22 is considered in an African context. Biblical interpretation in Africa has often been influenced by both Christianity and African cultural values. In many African communities, people do not approach the Bible as a completely foreign book. They read it through ideas about family, marriage, morality, community and religion that are already present in their societies. These ideas provide a useful basis for examining how Leviticus 18:22 is understood in Asaba.

Therefore, this study examines the contextual interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 among the people of Asaba, Nigeria. It seeks to understand the biblical meaning of the passage and to examine how that meaning is received within the cultural and Christian setting of Asaba. Bringing these two contexts together provides a clearer understanding of the place of Leviticus 18:22 in contemporary African society, particularly Asaba.

Literature Review: Contextual Biblical Interpretation

Contextual biblical interpretation is concerned with the relationship between the biblical text and the people who read it. It recognises that the Bible was written in particular historical and cultural settings, while its readers also live in their own cultural and social environments. The task of interpretation is therefore not only to ask what a biblical passage meant in the past, but also to ask how it is understood and applied in a different setting. This approach is important for the present study because Leviticus 18:22 was written in the world of ancient Israel, while the people of Asaba read the passage within a contemporary Nigerian setting. The two contexts are different. They have different histories, cultures, social structures and religious experiences. A study of the passage must therefore pay attention to both contexts (Nyiawung 2013).

African scholars have given considerable attention to contextual interpretation. Nyiawung (2013) argues that the African context has an important contribution to make to biblical interpretation. He proposes an approach that brings together the historical information of the biblical text, its social concerns and the context of the African reader. For Nyiawung, there is no culture that should automatically be regarded as superior in the interpretation of Scripture. The African context can therefore become a meaningful part of the interpretive process.

Adamo (2015) similarly describes African biblical hermeneutics as an approach that takes African worldviews, cultures and life experiences seriously. He argues that biblical interpretation always takes place within a context. African readers therefore do not approach Scripture without cultural assumptions. Their experiences and social realities can influence the

questions they ask of the biblical text. However, contextual interpretation does not mean that the reader is free to give the Bible any meaning he or she wishes. This is an important issue in the present study. Ellington (2021) warns that a reader-centred approach can sometimes allow the voice of the community to become louder than the voice of Scripture. He therefore argues for an approach that brings contextual reading together with careful attention to the literary context of the biblical passage. In his view, the text and the reader's context should enter into a dialogue.

This balanced position is useful for interpreting Leviticus 18:22 among the people of Asaba. The researcher should neither ignore the Asaba cultural setting nor allow the cultural setting to determine the meaning of the biblical text before the text has been properly examined. The first task is to understand what Leviticus 18:22 says within its own literary and historical setting. The second task is to examine how that teaching is received and understood in Asaba. Contextual interpretation can therefore be understood as a meeting between two worlds. The first is the world of the biblical text, with its language, history, culture and religious ideas. The second is the world of the reader, with its own culture, experiences, beliefs and social questions. Good interpretation takes both worlds seriously. This approach is particularly relevant to African biblical studies because Christianity in Africa did not develop in a cultural vacuum. Christianity came into African societies that already had established beliefs about God, family, marriage, morality, community and human relationships. As African Christians received the Bible, they interpreted it through these existing cultural experiences. This has made contextual interpretation an important part of African theological reflection.

The Asaba context provides a useful example of this process. The people of Asaba have their own historical and cultural background. Isichei (1969), in her study of Asaba before 1885, used both documentary records and oral traditions to describe the traditional social and political organisation of the community. Her work shows that Asaba had an established social structure before the expansion of European missionary activity. She also notes that the growth of Catholic and Protestant missionary activities later had an important effect on the community's way of life. The interaction between Christianity and Asaba culture is therefore relevant to the interpretation of biblical texts. The people did not receive Christianity without a cultural background. Rather, Christian teaching entered an existing society and interacted with its beliefs and values. The Asaba Development Association's *Asaba: History and Development* also presents sections dealing with traditional organisation, festivals, language, religion, judicial practices and social development, showing the broad range of cultural institutions within the community.

For the people of Asaba, therefore, responsible interpretation requires a conversation between the biblical world and the contemporary cultural world. Such an approach does not remove the authority of Scripture, nor does it treat culture as automatically correct. Rather, it allows Scripture and culture to be examined critically and respectfully.

The study also concludes that the controversy surrounding Leviticus 18:22 should not prevent serious theological reflection. The Christian community in Asaba can engage the text honestly while recognising the complexity of its interpretation. Such engagement should be marked by sound biblical scholarship, awareness of context, respect for human dignity and avoidance of careless judgments.

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context of Leviticus

Understanding the book of Leviticus requires some knowledge of the socio-historical world in which it developed. Leviticus is not simply a collection of religious rules; it reflects the beliefs, practices and concerns of ancient Israel. The book deals with worship, sacrifice, purity, holiness, priesthood, food, family relationships and different forms of conduct expected from members of the community. These subjects show that religion in ancient Israel was closely connected with everyday life. For the Israelites, there was no clear separation between religious life and social life. What a person did in the family, community and place of worship could have religious significance. The name “Leviticus” comes from the Greek title *Levitikon*, meaning something related to the Levites. The Hebrew tradition, however, identifies the book by its opening words, *wayyiqra’*, meaning “and he called.” The book forms the third part of the Pentateuch and follows Exodus. While Exodus tells of Israel's departure from Egypt and the

establishment of the covenant, Leviticus gives detailed instructions about how the people were expected to live as a people belonging to God.

The traditional Jewish and Christian understanding has often connected the laws in Leviticus with Moses. The book itself presents many of its laws as instructions given by Yahweh through Moses to the Israelites. Modern biblical scholarship, however, has raised questions about the process through which the book reached its present form. Many scholars associate significant portions of Leviticus with priestly traditions and with a period in Israel's history when questions of worship, purity and communal identity were especially important. Levine (1989) explains that Leviticus reflects the concerns of a priestly community whose religious system was built around sacrifice, holiness and proper relationships between God and the people.

The historical background of Leviticus is therefore important because the book reflects a society in which religion played a central role in maintaining social order. Ancient Israel was largely an agrarian society. Family, clan, land and religious identity were closely connected. People understood themselves not simply as individuals but as members of families and larger communities. This communal understanding is important when interpreting the laws found in Leviticus. Many of the laws were concerned with protecting the identity and holiness of the entire community.

The Israelites also lived in a world surrounded by other peoples and religious traditions. The Old Testament frequently refers to Egypt, Canaan and other neighbouring peoples. Leviticus 18 itself begins by warning the Israelites not to behave like the people of Egypt and Canaan. This suggests that the laws in the chapter were partly concerned with how Israel was to maintain its identity in a world where different communities had different religious and social practices. Milgrom (2000) observes that the holiness laws were closely connected with Israel's understanding of itself as a people set apart for Yahweh. The concern was therefore not only about individual behaviour but also about the kind of community Israel was expected to become. The concept of holiness is central to understanding Leviticus. In the biblical sense, holiness involves being set apart for God. It does not refer only to personal goodness. It also involves maintaining distinctions between what was considered holy and what was considered common, and between what was considered clean and unclean. These distinctions appear throughout the book. They can be seen in the regulations concerning sacrifices, priests, food, bodily conditions, sexual relations and contact with certain forms of impurity.

Leviticus 17–26 is commonly referred to as the "Holiness Code" because of its repeated emphasis on holiness. One of its important statements is the command, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The command shows that holiness was understood as a way of life rather than something restricted to priests or places of worship. Israel's relationship with God was expected to influence its social and moral behaviour. This understanding of holiness helps to explain why sexual behaviour appears in the same broad legal tradition as other matters concerning purity and community life. Sexual relationships were not viewed merely as private matters. They could affect family relationships, inheritance, social identity and the religious life of the community. Klawans (2000) notes that ancient Jewish ideas of purity and impurity were connected with the organisation of religious and social life. It is therefore important to avoid reading the sexual laws of Leviticus only through modern ideas about private morality.

Family was also very important in ancient Israelite society. The family provided identity, protection, economic support and continuity from one generation to another. Marriage was therefore more than a private relationship between two individuals. It had implications for kinship and the future of the family. The importance given to children, inheritance and family continuity can be seen in several parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Understanding Leviticus and the Holiness Code

The book of Leviticus occupies an important place in the Pentateuch. It comes after Exodus and before Numbers and is mainly concerned with the religious and social life of Israel. At first reading, much of the book may appear to consist of rules about sacrifices, priests, purity and forbidden practices. However, a closer reading shows that Leviticus is concerned with a

much larger question: how a people who belong to God should live. Leviticus presents Israel as a people who have been brought into a special relationship with Yahweh. The book therefore gives instructions about worship and also about everyday conduct. Stackert and Boyd (2012) observe that the laws in Leviticus are presented as instructions intended to establish the conditions for God's presence among the Israelites. This helps to explain why the book brings religious practices and social behaviour together. The life of the community was expected to reflect its relationship with God.

One of the most important sections of Leviticus is chapters 17–26. Biblical scholars commonly refer to this section as the Holiness Code**.** The name comes from the repeated command that Israel should be holy because Yahweh is holy. Stackert (2013) explains that the Holiness Code is mainly found in Leviticus 17–26 and can be distinguished from other priestly materials by its language, themes and particular theological concerns. He further notes that recent scholarship often understands the Holiness material as a body of laws that revised, supplemented and developed earlier priestly traditions.

Kugler (1997) points out that the Holiness Code presents an understanding of holiness that reaches beyond the priestly world of ritual. His study suggests that the Holiness Code gives holiness a wider social dimension. In other words, holiness is not only about what happens at the sanctuary. It also concerns the conduct of ordinary members of the community. This wider understanding of holiness can also be seen in Leviticus 19. The chapter combines religious commands with social and ethical responsibilities. The people are told to respect parents, observe the Sabbath, deal honestly with others, care for the poor and avoid injustice. The famous command to love one's neighbour appears in this chapter. These instructions show that the Holiness Code does not treat religion and social responsibility as separate matters.

Mohrmann (2004) gives particular attention to this feature of Leviticus 18. He argues that the sexual laws in the chapter can be understood as part of a system of boundaries. According to his analysis, the laws move through different levels of social relationships, beginning with close family relationships and extending towards wider social and national boundaries. The sexual regulations therefore help define the boundaries within which Israel was expected to live. This observation is important because it prevents the interpreter from viewing the laws in Leviticus 18 simply as a modern list of private sexual rules. The chapter is concerned with the organisation of Israelite society. It addresses sexual relationships within the larger question of how Israel should live differently from the surrounding peoples.

Literary Context of Leviticus 18:22

Leviticus 18:22 cannot be properly understood when it is separated from the rest of the chapter. The verse is part of a larger discussion about sexual relationships and the kind of conduct expected from the people of Israel. Before examining the meaning of the verse itself, it is therefore necessary to look at the way chapter 18 is arranged and the issues that surround it. Leviticus 18 begins with a direct statement from Yahweh to Moses: “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 18:1–2). This opening is important because it establishes the authority behind the instructions that follow. The laws are presented not simply as human opinions but as commands associated with Yahweh. The repeated use of the expression “I am the LORD your God” also reminds the Israelites that their behaviour should be guided by their relationship with God. The first major instruction in the chapter is a warning against following the customs of Egypt and Canaan. The Israelites are told not to behave according to the practices of the people among whom they had lived or the people whose land they were entering. Instead, they were to follow Yahweh's laws and ordinances (Lev. 18:3–5). This introduction provides an important key to the rest of the chapter. The sexual laws that follow are presented within a larger concern about Israel's way of life.

Leviticus 18:5 then states that the person who follows God's statutes and ordinances will live by them. This statement is significant because it connects obedience with life. The laws are not presented simply as restrictions. They are presented as part of the way Israel is expected to live before God. From verse 6, the chapter begins to deal with specific sexual relationships. The first group of regulations concerns sexual relations involving close family members. The phrase

"to uncover the nakedness" occurs repeatedly in this part of the chapter. Scholars have understood this expression as a biblical way of referring to sexual relations. The repeated use of the phrase gives the section a clear literary pattern.

Verses 6–18 list different forms of sexual relationships that are prohibited. These include relationships involving one's father, mother, father's wife, sister, granddaughter, half-sister, aunt and daughter-in-law. The list also includes the wife of one's brother and relations involving a woman and her daughter. The detailed nature of the list shows that the chapter is concerned with maintaining boundaries within family and kinship relationships. The importance of these family boundaries should not be overlooked. Ancient Israel was a strongly kinship-based society. Family relationships were central to identity, inheritance, social responsibility and community life. Sexual relations within prohibited family relationships were therefore not treated as private matters alone. They could affect the structure and stability of the family.

The chapter then moves to another category of sexual conduct. Leviticus 18:19 prohibits sexual intercourse with a woman during the period of her menstrual impurity. Verse 20 prohibits sexual relations with the wife of one's neighbour. Verse 21 prohibits the Israelites from giving their children to Molech and thereby prof*Ani*ng the name of God. These laws show that the chapter is not dealing with one single issue. It covers different forms of behaviour that the biblical writer considers unacceptable. It is within this sequence that Leviticus 18:22 appears. The verse states that a male should not lie with another male "as with a woman." The following verse, Leviticus 18:23, prohibits sexual relations with an *Ani*mal. This means that verse 22 is surrounded by other sexual prohibitions. The immediate context therefore supports the view that the verse is concerned with sexual behaviour rather than with ordinary social relationships between men.

The literary position of the verse is important. It appears after regulations concerning incest and adultery and immediately before the prohibition of sexual relations with *Ani*mals. This arrangement suggests that the verse forms part of a larger list of prohibited sexual practices. However, identifying the verse as part of a list of prohibited sexual practices does not by itself answer every question about its meaning. The interpreter must still ask why this particular practice was prohibited, how the ancient Israelites understood it, and what ideas about gender, family, honour, purity and holiness influenced the law. This is where the wider context of verses 24–30 becomes important. After listing the prohibited practices, the writer returns to the issue of the nations. The Israelites are warned not to defile themselves through such practices because the nations that lived in the land had been defiled by them. The land itself is described as having been polluted by the actions of its inhabitants. The language of defilement gives the chapter a religious dimension. The concern is not simply that some sexual acts are socially undesirable. The text presents them as practices that can affect the relationship between the people, God and the land. Leviticus 18:24–30 therefore brings the chapter back to the theme introduced in verses 1–5: Israel must live differently from the surrounding peoples.

Milgrom (2000) pays considerable attention to this connection between the sexual laws and the idea of defilement. In his interpretation, the laws of Leviticus 18 are connected with Israel's holiness and with its responsibility to preserve the land from pollution. This means that the chapter has a communal dimension. What individuals do is presented as having consequences for the wider community. The repetition of the idea of defilement also helps to explain why the chapter begins and ends with references to the practices of other nations. The structure can therefore be seen in a simple way. The chapter begins with a warning not to imitate Egypt and Canaan, gives a series of prohibited practices, and ends by explaining why Israel must avoid those practices. The central laws are therefore surrounded by a larger argument about Israel's identity and holiness.

Mohrmann (2004) argues that the arrangement of Leviticus 18 is important for understanding its sexual regulations. His study draws attention to the way the chapter moves through different kinds of sexual boundaries. The regulations concerning close relatives are followed by other forms of prohibited sexual relations, and the chapter finally returns to the issue of the community's relationship with the surrounding peoples and the land. This suggests that the

writer was concerned with social boundaries as well as sexual behaviour. The expression "as with a woman" in verse 22 has also received considerable scholarly attention. The wording raises questions about how the ancient Israelites understood male-male sexual relations and the roles of men and women. It is important to note that the biblical text does not use the modern concept of "sexual orientation."

Situating Leviticus 18:22 within Asaba Socio-Cultural and Religious Context

A contextual interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 among the people of Asaba cannot be adequately developed without considering the socio-cultural and religious values that have historically shaped the community's understanding of sexuality, marriage, family and acceptable social behaviour. This is important because contextual biblical interpretation involves a dialogue between the world of the biblical text and the world of the contemporary reader. In the case of Asaba, that contemporary world has been shaped by indigenous traditions, Christianity, family structures, communal expectations, formal education, urb*Ani*sation and changing patterns of social interaction. Consequently, the interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 among Asaba people cannot be separated from these social and religious influences.

Asaba is an Igbo-speaking community situated on the western bank of the Niger River in present-day Delta State. Historical scholarship indicates that Asaba possessed an established social and political organisation before the intensification of European missionary activity. Isichei (1969) observes that Asaba had its own traditional political structure, family genealogies and systems of social organisation before Christianity and European colonial influence became significant. She further notes that the arrival and subsequent expansion of Catholic and Protestant missionary activities had a considerable effect on Asaba's way of life. This historical development is important because contemporary Asaba values cannot be understood exclusively in terms of either traditional religion or Christianity. Rather, they have developed through an interaction between indigenous institutions and Christian religious influence.

Marriage and family occupy an important position in traditional Asaba social organisation. The family historically served not only as a place of comp*Ani*onship but also as the principal institution through which lineage, inheritance, identity and social continuity were maintained. This means that sexual relationships were understood within a wider framework of family responsibility rather than merely as expressions of individual preference. Patrick A. C. Isichei's (1973) study, *Sex in Traditional Asaba*, is particularly significant in this regard. His research examines sexual education, premarital sexual morality, relations between relatives, sexual relations within marriage and the general organisation of sexuality in traditional Asaba. The study demonstrates that sexuality was governed by established social expectations and that sexual behaviour was connected with wider ideas about family and gender roles.

The Asaba traditional understanding of sexuality was therefore not completely individualistic. Sexual conduct was expected to conform to the moral expectations of the community. Isichei (1973) notes, for example, that traditional Asaba society placed considerable restrictions on the sexual knowledge and behaviour of young people. The division of responsibilities between males and females also contributed to the formation of distinct expectations concerning masculinity and femininity. Boys and girls were socialised into different roles, and behaviour regarded as inconsistent with expected gender roles could attract social disapproval.

This background provides an important cultural context for the reception of Leviticus 18:22. The verse speaks about male sexual behaviour. Traditional Asaba society equally has established expectations concerning male and female roles and conduct in the society. This suggests that an Asaba reader may approach Leviticus 18:22 with pre-existing ideas about masculinity, femininity, marriage and acceptable sexual behaviour. Traditional Asaba society attached moral significance to sexual behaviour. Isichei (1973) records that premarital sexuality, sexual relations between relatives, and sexual conduct within marriage were regulated by social expectations. Sexuality was therefore not regarded simply as a private matter without communal consequences. The community had expectations concerning appropriate sexual behaviour, and individuals were socialised into those expectations.

This aspect of traditional Asaba culture provides an important point of contact with Leviticus 18, which places sexual behaviour within a larger framework of community morality. The chapter does not treat sexuality as an isolated private issue. Its prohibitions are presented alongside concerns about family relationships, holiness, social boundaries and the identity of Israel. The parallel should not be overstated, because ancient Israel and traditional Asaba were historically and culturally different societies. Nevertheless, both contexts demonstrate that sexual behaviour can be interpreted within wider communal systems of morality. The implication is that when Leviticus 18:22 is read in Asaba, the passage encounters an audience that already has ideas about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable sexual conduct. The reader therefore does not approach the verse as a culturally neutral individual. Existing cultural assumptions can influence how the verse is understood.

Exegetical Interpretation of Leviticus 18:22

Leviticus 18:22 is a short verse, but its interpretation has often generated a long discussion among biblical scholars. The verse is commonly translated in English as: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev. 18:22). The Hebrew text contains the words *wĕʾet-zākār lōʾ tiškab miškĕvē ʾiššâ tôʿēbâ hîʾ*. The differences in English translations come mainly from the way translators understand this construction (Stone, 2022).

The first important word in the verse is *zākār*, usually translated as "male." The word can refer to a male person and is also used in other parts of the Hebrew Bible to distinguish males from females. Its use in Leviticus 18:22 is worth noting because the writer does not use the more common Hebrew word *ʾîš*, which can mean "man" or "husband." The choice of *zākār* has attracted the attention of scholars who have asked whether the verse is concerned with male sexual activity in general or with a particular kind of sexual relationship. The next important expression is *miškĕvē ʾiššâ*. The noun *miškāb* is related to the verb "to lie" and can refer to a lying down or a sexual lying. In Leviticus 18:22, the plural form *miškĕvē* is used. The expression is commonly translated as "as with a woman" in English Bibles. However, the Hebrew wording is more unusual than the English translation may suggest.

Stone (2022), in his survey of historical-critical scholarship on Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, draws attention to the fact that scholars have offered many different explanations of this wording. His review identifies at least twenty-one different proposals concerning what the two passages mean. This is significant because it shows that the interpretation of the verse is not as simple within academic biblical scholarship as popular discussions sometimes suggest. Stone's study is particularly useful for this research because it helps to place the present discussion within the wider history of interpretation. He notes that some interpreters have understood the passages as a general prohibition of male same-sex intercourse. Other scholars have suggested more specific meanings connected with social status, gender roles, incest, marriage, domination or particular forms of sexual behaviour. The existence of these different proposals does not mean that every interpretation is equally convincing. It does mean, however, that the passage deserves careful examination before a final position is taken.

Joosten (2020) re-examines the Hebrew vocabulary of Leviticus 18:22 and its parallel in Leviticus 20:13. He pays particular attention to the wording of the passage and compares it with Genesis 49:4. Joosten (2020) argues that the verse may be concerned specifically with homosexual intercourse involving a married man. In his reading, the language can be connected with the idea of lying on a woman's bed and having sexual relations with her male partner. Joosten's interpretation is important even if one does not finally accept it. It shows why Hebrew vocabulary matters in biblical interpretation. A reader who depends only on an English translation may not notice the grammatical and lexical questions that arise from the original text. Joosten's argument therefore reminds interpreters that a translation is already an interpretation. The words chosen by translators can influence how readers understand the biblical passage.

Another scholar who has raised questions about the traditional translation is K. Renato Lings. In his study of Leviticus 18:22, Lings examines the expression *miškĕvē ʾiššâ* and argues that the Hebrew wording may have a more restricted meaning than is usually assumed. He suggests that the passage may be connected with male-male incest rather than being a general

statement about all sexual relations between males. His argument is based mainly on the language and literary context of the passage. Lings' proposal is controversial, and it should not simply be accepted because it provides an alternative interpretation. Its v*Ani*e for the present study is that it demonstrates the importance of examining the internal structure of the Hebrew text. It also shows that the immediate context of Leviticus 18, which contains a long list of prohibited family relationships, may have a bearing on how verse 22 is understood. The different interpretations proposed by Joosten and Lings should be placed alongside the more common interpretation of the verse. The traditional reading understands Leviticus 18:22 as a prohibition against male same-sex intercourse. This remains an important interpretation within biblical scholarship and Christian traditions. Stone's survey confirms that many scholars continue to understand the passage in this general way, even though they may disagree about the reasons behind the prohibition and its precise scope.

Implications of Leviticus 18:22 for the People of Asaba

The contextual interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 becomes incomplete if it stops at the historical meaning of the biblical text. The next question concerns its significance for the community in which the text is being interpreted. For the people of Asaba, the implications of Leviticus 18:22 extend beyond the question of whether the verse prohibits a particular sexual act. The passage raises questions concerning biblical authority, cultural values, Christian morality, family relationships, pastoral responsibility, human dignity and the relationship between Scripture and contemporary society. One major implication of Leviticus 18:22 for Asaba is its continuing influence on Christian moral instruction. Because Christianity occupies an important position in contemporary Asaba religious life, biblical texts concerning sexual morality are likely to influence the teaching of churches and Christian families. Leviticus 18:22 may consequently be used alongside other biblical passages in discussions concerning sexual ethics.

The importance of this implication is strengthened by the historical development of Christianity in Asaba. As noted earlier, missionary activity had a significant influence on the community's way of life (Isichei, 1969). Thus, the reception of Leviticus 18:22 in contemporary Asaba cannot be understood independently of the Christian history of the community. However, Christian moral teaching should distinguish between explaining what the biblical text says and condemning persons. A theological interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 may reach a particular conclusion concerning the sexual act prohibited by the text, while Christian pastoral practice should still recognise the dignity of every human being. This distinction is important because interpretation of a difficult text can easily become an occasion for hostility rather than theological reflection.

A second implication concerns the traditional importance of marriage and family. Asaba social organisation has historically placed substantial importance on family relationships and continuity. Isichei's (1973) study demonstrates the significance of sexuality and marriage within traditional Asaba social organisation. Leviticus 18:22 may therefore reinforce, within Christian interpretation, the preference for sexual relationships understood within established heterosexual marriage. For some Asaba Christians, the passage may consequently be understood as supporting existing cultural expectations concerning male-female marriage and family life. Nevertheless, the researcher should avoid presenting this relationship as though culture simply determines biblical meaning. The biblical text arose in a different historical environment. The proper contextual question is how the biblical teaching interacts with existing Asaba values. In this sense, Leviticus 18:22 becomes part of an ongoing dialogue between Scripture and culture.

Leviticus 18:22 also has implications for the way gender roles are understood in Asaba. The expression “as with a woman” assumes a distinction between male and female sexual roles. Traditional Asaba society likewise maintained differentiated expectations concerning male and female behaviour. Isichei (1973) demonstrates that gender distinctions were visible in childhood socialisation and in the division of tasks between males and females. The verse may therefore reinforce traditional perceptions that sexual behaviour should correspond with established male-female distinctions. However, the researcher must be cautious here. Gender roles in contemporary Asaba have changed significantly as a result of education, urb*Ani*sation, economic

transformation and Christianity. The interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 should consequently not be used automatically to preserve every traditional gender expectation. Leviticus 18 presents sexual behaviour as having implications for the wider community. This communal dimension has significance for Asaba because traditional social organisation has historically placed considerable importance on family, kinship and community identity. Isichei (1969) demonstrates the importance of family genealogies and traditional social organisation in the historical development of Asaba.

Conclusion

This study has examined the contextual interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 among the people of Asaba, Nigeria, with the aim of establishing the convergence between the Old Testament moral vision and Asaba indigenous sexual ethics. From the exegetical and ethnographic data presented, it is evident that both traditions maintain a consistent and unambiguous stance on homosexual practice. Exegetically, Leviticus 18:22 employs the Hebrew term *to'ebah* (abomination), which in the context of Leviticus 18 and 20 does not refer merely to a ceremonial impurity limited to ancient Israelite cultic practice, but to a moral violation of the created order. The structure of Leviticus 18 frames human sexuality within the context of creation, holiness, and the preservation of the community from defilement. The prohibition is not presented as a temporary regulation for Israel's separation from Canaan, but as part of the reason the land itself vomited out its former inhabitants (Lev. 18:24-25). Its moral force, therefore, transcends its immediate historical context.

Similarly, among the people of Asaba, human sexuality is not understood as a matter of private individual choice but as a communal reality that affects the entire cosmological balance. Data from interviews with elders, *Ofo* title holders, and custodians of *Omenala* reveal that same-sex sexual acts are categorised as *Ani* and *Nso Ani* - an abomination and an offence against *Ani*, the earth deity who is the custodian of morality. In the Asaba worldview, *Ani* is an act that pollutes the land and attracts communal misfortune, such as infertility, poor harvest, and untimely deaths, until ritual cleansing (*Ikpu Ani*) is performed. Homosexuality, as an *Ani*, has no place in the traditional marriage institution, which is defined as *di na nwunye* (union of husband and wife) for procreation, continuity of lineage, and alliance between families. The contextual reading by Asaba Christians therefore does not see Leviticus 18:22 as an alien imposition but as a biblical affirmation of what is already embedded in their own *Omenala*.

For the Asaba interpreter, the Bible and culture speak with one voice: the act is forbidden. This convergence strengthens the reception of the text as retaining universal moral authority rather than being a culturally obsolete law.

In conclusion, the study affirms that for both the Old Testament and the Asaba traditional culture, homosexual practice is understood not as an alternative sexual orientation to be accommodated, but as a departure from both divine instruction and communal moral order. The implications for the contemporary Church in Asaba are threefold: first, to maintain faithful teaching on the authority of Scripture on matters of sexuality; second, to recognise that this teaching finds resonance rather than resistance in indigenous culture; and third, to engage persons with pastoral sensitivity while upholding the moral boundaries established by both *Akwukwo Nso* (Holy Scripture) and *Omenala* Asaba. Further research is recommended on how this shared moral heritage can inform Christian pastoral care and community moral education in the face of contemporary pressures from globalisation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings that both the Old Testament and Asaba indigenous culture view homosexual practice as *to'ebah* and *Ani* - an abomination that violates divine and communal order - the following recommendations are made.

1. **For the Church in Asaba**

The Church should maintain a clear and consistent teaching on human sexuality rooted in biblical theology and reinforced by Asaba cultural values. This requires intentional discipleship rather than silence. The Anglican Diocese of Asaba, Pentecostal churches, Catholic parishes, and other churches should develop contextual catechetical materials that teach Leviticus 18:22 not as a Western conservative import, but as *Iwu Chineke nke dabara na Omenala* Asaba - God's law that agrees with Asaba custom. Seminaries and Bible schools in Delta State should train pastors to handle issues of sexuality with both biblical fidelity and pastoral maturity, avoiding both hateful condemnation of persons and uncritical affirmation of acts contrary to Scripture and culture.

2. **For Traditional Institution (Asagba-in-Council and *Olinzele*)**

The traditional institution should continue to serve as custodian of communal morality. The Asagba-in-Council, as holders of *Ofo*, should strengthen intergenerational transmission of *Omenala* on marriage and family life through community dialogue, folklore, and initiation rites that affirm heterosexual marriage as the foundation of lineage continuity. This is necessary in the face of cultural erosion through social media and globalisation that presents foreign sexual ethics as superior to indigenous values.

3. **For Christian Families and Parents**

Parents should reclaim their primary role as moral educators. The study reveals that the gap between biblical teaching and contemporary youth perception is widening due to external influences. Families should create safe spaces for open discussion on sexuality where children are taught from an early age that both the Bible and Asaba culture uphold marriage between man and woman. This will prevent young people from seeing Christian sexual ethics as outdated or foreign.

4. **For Theological and Academic Institutions**

There is a need for further contextual biblical scholarship that examines other contested texts on sexuality (such as Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10) within Asaba and broader Igbo worldviews. Researchers should document oral traditions, proverbs, and taboos related to *Ani* and *Nso Ani* before they are lost, to provide robust indigenous theological resources for future generations.

5. **For Pastoral Engagement**

While upholding the moral prohibition, the Church must adopt a pastoral model that distinguishes between the act and the person. Pastoral care should uphold truth without dehum*Ani*sation, offering counselling, discipleship, and restoration to persons struggling with same-sex attraction, in line with the biblical pattern of truth and grace.

6. **For Church-State and Church-Culture Dialogue**

The Church in Asaba should engage in proactive dialogue with civil society, schools, and media to articulate a coherent African Christian sexual ethic that is not merely reactive to Western debates. This will ensure that public policies on family and sexuality in Delta State reflect both scriptural and culturally rooted values. In essence, the convergence of Leviticus 18:22 and Asaba *Omenala* offers the Church an opportunity to teach a sexual ethic that is biblically faithful, culturally authentic, and communally transformative.

References

Adamo, D. T. (2015). What is African biblical hermeneutics? *Black Theology, 13*(1), 59–72. https://doi.org/10.1179/1476994815Z.00000000047.

Asaba Development Association (1978). *Asaba: History and development*. Asaba Development Association.

Ellington, D. W. (2021). The promise of attending to literary context for contextual biblical hermeneutics in Africa. *Acta Theologica, 41*(2), 126–144. https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup32.8

Isichei, E. (1969). Historical change in an Ibo polity: Asaba to 1885. *The Journal of African History*, *10*(3), 421–438. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700036367

Joosten, J. T. A. (2020). A new interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 (par. 20:13) and its ethical implications. *The Journal of Theological Studies, 71*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flaa002

Lings, K. R. (2009). The "lyings" of a woman: Male-male incest in Leviticus 18.22? *Theology & Sexuality*, *15*(2), 231–250.

Lipka, H. (2006). *Sexual transgression in the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Mohrmann, D. C. (2004). Making sense of sex: A study of Leviticus 18. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 29*(1), 27–52.

Nyiawung, M. D. (2013). Contextualising biblical exegesis: What is the African biblical hermeneutic approach? *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 69*(1), Article 2011. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2011

Olyan, S. M. (1994). "And with a male you shall not lie the lying down of a woman": On the meaning and significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, *5*(2), 179–206.

Stone, M. P. (2022). Don't do what to whom? A survey of historical-critical scholarship on Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13. *Currents in Biblical Research, 20*(3), 203–233.

Töyräänvuori, J. (2020). Homosexuality, the Holiness Code, and ritual pollution: A case of mistaken identity. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 45*(2), 236–267.

Walsh, J. T. (2001). Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: Who is doing what to whom? *Journal of Biblical Literature, 120*(2), 201–209. https://doi.org/10.2307/3268292

Wells, B. (2020). On the beds of a woman: The Leviticus texts on same-sex relations reconsidered. In H. Lipka & B. Wells (Eds.), *Sexuality and law in the Torah* (pp. 123–158). Bloomsbury T&T Clark.