



Homosexuality and the Old Testament*

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What the Bible says about homoerotic behavior is not a mystery. Although the subject does not come up often—the matter is not a cause célèbre among biblical writers—when it does arise, the response is negative. This has been the common interpretation of Jewish and Christian communities throughout history. Despite a variety of recent attempts, it no longer seems possible to deny that the Scriptures say what they say here. Our task will be to hear the biblical words in their historical and theological contexts and to interpret them for our own day.

I. GOD AND SEXUALITY

Generally speaking, in the ancient world the gods came in mixed pairs. Sexuality and fertility were very close to the heart of religion. Given the fundamental issues at stake—sexual desire, procreation, life itself—fertility religions are neither surprising nor silly. In a world of male and female deities, it was not difficult to imagine that male and female human beings both carried the divine image. In such a world, sexual expression was drawn directly into worship. If sexuality is at the heart of divinity, then sexual union is rightfully drawn into the precincts of the temple itself; it becomes a form of mystical union with the gods and, at the same time, an act of sympathetic magic, encouraging the heavenly powers to bestow fertility upon human beings along with their crops and flocks. Religious homage to sexuality often included also homosexual activity.

Enter Yahwism with its central creedal insistence that God is one (Deut 6:4). Now what? One possibility would be to define the one God as either male or female and then to give priority to the corresponding human gender, which alone would be able to claim the divine image. The feminist critique argues that this is all too close to what did happen, but the biblical self-understanding is different. Surpris-

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ingly, though God is one, both males and females are seen in the divine image (Gen 1:27). The implications of all this are astounding. In the first place, the primary religious stories are no longer about intercourse (sexual or other) among the gods. God's conversation partner is humanity, we are much more directly involved in the story, and there are all kinds of other interesting things to talk about. In the second place, in a fundamental way—the full significance of which will be recognized only gradually—gender is removed from the deity. True, God will still be imaged and addressed primarily as “he” (though female verbal images will be permitted);

such address is theologically and experientially necessary to express and maintain the personal nature of God and the intimate relationship between God and people. But God will not be simplistically identified or limited by human gender, and the faint memory of sexual intercourse with the heavenly powers will remain only as a sinful aberration (Gen 6:1-4). Finally, sex is demythologized, de-idolized, demoted—it is no longer the primary form of religious expression nor *the* central determinant of human identity; of course, it will always remain important, but it is creature now, gift among gifts—to be enjoyed, protected, regulated, and employed responsibly in life before God and for the neighbor. In its stories and legal codes, Israel will spell out how this works.

II. SEXUALITY AND HUMANITY

What does it mean to be human? The Old Testament answers this question in its primal story (Gen 2-3). To be human is a complex and wonderful reality which, according to the story, includes several significant and essential relationships. The human is first and foremost related to God, as creature to Creator; subsequently, the human is related to the rest of creation—made from clay, enlivened by breath, associated with the animals, living in space and time. Humans are creatures of purpose—given work, an appreciation of beauty, and finally community. Intriguingly, Adam’s initial cry on being introduced to Eve is a joyful expression of likeness (“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”); only then does he recognize the difference (“she shall be called Woman”). In other words, community is established first for its own sake, that humans can be “helpers” for one another (see Eccl 4:9-12). Sexual differentiation and sexual community come as happy surprise within general human community; they exist, in the story, for the sake of identity and joy, family unity and procreation. Gen 1 directly relates blessing to fertility and procreation; all of this is seen as closely connected with the divine image. Sexual energy and creativity, no longer tied to the realm of the gods, is given as a fundamental gift to human beings.

Recalling this basic story in the context of a discussion of homosexuality makes clear first how much is shared by all human beings, despite differences of sexual orientation. Up until the last lines, all humans will recognize themselves (and one another) in this basic story. We are reminded that we are all God’s creatures, all in relationship with the environment and one another, all recipients of vocation and appreciators of beauty, all in need of human community. The socio-political, theological, and ethical implications should be obvious. Humans are humans—called to relationship with God and to be helpers of one another, to recognize in the other that which also constitutes the self, and to act accordingly.

At the same time, understanding the significance of this primal story will be

the most important factor in comprehending the Bible’s difficulties with homoerotic behavior. Since sexuality is integrally (though not solely) related to fertility and procreation, since human community is based in the happy recognition of both the sameness and the (especially sexual) otherness of the one who is not self, homosexual activity will be seen as unable fully to participate in or express the gifts of creation. It will be in some way outside the garden.

III. SODOM AND GIBEAH

Traditionally, God's judgment upon Sodom (Gen 18:16-19:29) has been seen as the Bible's clearest condemnation of homosexual activity. On the other hand, many recent interpreters have argued that the sin of Sodom is not homosexuality, but a breaking of ancient oriental rules of hospitality. The townspeople's desire to "know" Lot's visitors was merely a request to become acquainted with them. What more can be said about this?

1. The sexual offense cannot be eliminated from the story. The offer of Lot's daughters (including the use of the same verb—"to know"—in a sexual sense) and the parallel sexual crime at Gibeah (Judg 19:1-30) make no sense if there are no sexual overtones to the story's initial confrontation.

2. The Sodom story may have had special reference to Israel's perception of sexual chaos in Canaan. It may function as a microcosmic example of a macrocosmic experience—Israel portrays itself as a "sojourner" in Canaan, subject to attack by the local inhabitants, with whom Israel associates inappropriate practices of sexuality and violence; the result is divine judgment by which God identifies and protects his own people.

3. On the other hand, the Sodom story and the Gibeah story must be read together. The outrage in the latter case is even greater since the offense is perpetrated by members of the covenant community. Sexual violence cannot be ascribed only to others. Nor can it be limited to homosexual activity. It is the heterosexual abuse of a woman which brings God's judgment in Gibeah, paralleling the judgment of attempted homosexual abuse of men at Sodom.

4. The actual attempted offense at Sodom was homosexual rape, probably not precipitated by sexual preference but by the desire to humiliate the visitors, to bring them into submission (a common practice in the ancient world; still present, e.g., among prison populations). The texts themselves say nothing about a given homosexual orientation or about non-violent sexual behavior; they do condemn both homosexual and heterosexual abuse and violence in the harshest terms.

5. As many writers have pointed out, clear reference to Sodom's sin as homosexual behavior per se is not found until the intertestamental period. This probably means that homosexuality was seen as a bigger issue later in the biblical period; it also probably tells us how the text was understood at the time it was canonized. Present biblical interpretation may need to re-establish the original sense of the Genesis story and the broader concerns of the story in Judges as a kind of prophetic word over against a different understanding by the later community; yet, present interpreters will also recognize that they live in a tradition stamped by the understanding of that later community, which makes its own claim to authority.

IV. LEVITICUS

In direct apodictic law (Lev 18:22) and in a casuistic statute which prescribes the death penalty (Lev 20:13), the Old Testament flatly condemns male homosexual activity. How shall these texts be understood?

1. The reference to this activity as "abomination" may cast it alongside those activities which are proscribed in Israel in order to separate the people of God from the idolatry of Egypt and Canaan (where sexual activity, including homosexual activity, was employed in worship). Much recent exegesis makes this connection, suggesting then that these texts have little

applicability to today. (On the other hand, the re-idolization of sex, including its promotion to the central characteristic of human identity and to the essential reality in the political and economic realm, may well be a key feature of our time.)

2. “Abominations” are not limited to cultic sin (cf. Jer 7:8-10). To suggest that all of the issues in these chapters of Leviticus (including, e.g., incest and child sacrifice) are condemned only because they were practiced by foreigners, as though the activities themselves are not of material concern, is untenable.

3. The Levitical laws mean to regulate the common life in Israel, paying particular attention to issues of sexuality which are of special importance to tribes, clans, or extended families living in close physical proximity. At stake is the protection of the community and its social structures, a concern which apparently takes precedence, at least in the matters listed here, over the free expression of the individual. This concern defines the argument about homosexual behavior differently than the modern concern for individual rights.

4. Theologically, the Levitical laws understand themselves as a response to divine promise. Since land and offspring were the central features of God’s initial promises to Israel, respect for and protection of the land and of sexual fertility have a prominent place in the laws.

5. Like the laws against incest and adultery, the laws against homosexual behavior define legitimate sexual partners. Precisely because the Old Testament sees sexuality in relation to intimacy and community, it will finally limit genital sexual expression to the committed relationship of marriage.

6. Anthropologists (e.g., Mary Douglas) have helped remove the mystery from ancient categories of uncleanness and taboo. The maintenance of order is not merely a matter of official control; it has to do with the defeat of chaos, the celebration of and participation in creation itself. Keeping boundaries and observing categories are part of this world view—which also includes laws against male homosexual activity.

7. There are no corresponding laws against female homosexual behavior. It is treacherous to speculate about reasons for this, but at least two may be postulated: (a) lack of visibility of the role of the ovum in conception and fertility, which may have concentrated attention on the more visible role of sperm; and (b) a patriarchal society (including patriarchal definitions of lineage) which was more threatened by male homosexual activity than by female activity.

8. The fact that no one in the responsible religious debate advocates the death penalty for homosexual behavior is a reminder that for all Christians (not just “moderates” or “liberals”) the issue is about *interpretation* of Scripture, not merely its simple literal application.

9. Christian use of Old Testament legal codes is notoriously arbitrary, with selective and oppressive application often the rule. Responsible interpretation will be concerned to hear the truth claims and the theological implications of all texts—not just some—while at the same time recognizing the extreme distance of the world of Leviticus from the world of today (read through the book’s other laws, thinking about how to apply them to the present).

10. All Christian interpretation of the law will be in the light of the gospel. This will, e.g., radically influence our relationships with and treatment of homosexual persons; yet it will not eradicate our present problem, since unlike dietary laws, which are specifically overturned in the New Testament, the proscription of homosexual activity specifically remains in the New

Testament.

V. CREATION AND LAW

The Levitical laws had to do, at least in part, with protecting and preserving sexual and familial relationships. These required protecting because Israel knew its primal story to include Gen 3, not only Gen 2. Humanity exists only in a condition of limitation, where every aspect of life is distorted by imperfection and sin.

Does this mean homosexual activity stands under God's judgment only in the same sense as all other relationships (e.g., marriage) which are also distorted? The Old Testament seems to answer the question negatively. To be sure, marriage, work, the relationship with the environment, etc., are all distorted, but these are all seen to have their origin within the "good" story. The distortion comes later. It seems harder to fit homoerotic behavior within the understanding of the human presented in Gen 2. To the degree that one can presume to read the mind of the Old Testament, it seems to imply that homosexuality belongs, in its origin, outside the garden. Such a perspective, speaking about creation and origins, will not be able to celebrate homosexuality as an alternate life style; at the same time, however, it will not yet be a sufficient basis to determine a biblical ethical response to individual homosexual persons.

Any discussion of homosexuality which invokes an argument from creation opens the door to consideration of new insights which arise within the realm of creation. The Old Testament itself frequently reflects a positive attitude toward human cultural growth. So, for a theology which seeks to learn from the Old Testament, the results of contemporary medical, psychological, and sociological research and experience must be taken as fully relevant data. Yet, because all human efforts take place in the context of sin, the data must be employed cautiously—and in conversation with the biblical observations.

A theological decision about the proper expression of homosexuality in our society will require giving careful consideration both to the witness of the Bible, with its warning against sexual idolatry and its concerns for sexual purity and blessed community under God, and to the insights gained through responsible use of all the God-given tools of contemporary human understanding. Such a decision will be made in the context of the church, seeking the communal wisdom of the saints, and in the context of prayer, seeking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.