

Chap. 3. Gender and Same-Sex Relations

The priestly account of creation in Genesis 1 reaches its climax in Gen 1:27:

So God created *adam* in his image;
In the image of God he created him;
Male and female he created them.

We are given little by way of context to explain what it means to be in the image of God. An image is a statue. Gods were normally represented by their statues in their temples in the ancient world. The statue served to represent the presence of the god. "The statue, then, is the vehicle through which a god resides in the community, maintains a presence, receives worship and prayer, and can actively participate in society."¹ In the ancient Near East the king was often said to be the image of a god, although he necessarily mediated the divine presence in a somewhat different way. This was commonly said of the Egyptian pharaoh, who was the visible form of a deity on earth. Mesopotamian kings are said to be the image of various gods, Enlil, or Shamash, or Marduk.² This is not said of the king in the Hebrew Bible. Here, humanity as such takes on this role. The image entails a likeness, a point that is noted explicitly in Gen 1:26, "let us make *adam* in our image, according to our likeness." One aspect of this likeness lies in the fact that humanity has dominion over all other creatures, fish, birds and land animals. This aspect of the creation story will concern us in a later chapter. For the present we wish to focus on the last part of Gen 1:27: "male and female he created them."

If humanity is in the image and likeness of God, and is also male and female, does this mean that God too is male and female? Not in the context of the

Hebrew Bible, or of the Priestly document (P). The idea that God might possess any form of sexuality would have been foreign and repugnant to the priestly writers.³ The statement that *adam* is created male and female, then, must be understood as a qualification of the likeness of God. Adam resembles God insofar as he shares in the work of creation, but he does this by procreating, and this requires sexual differentiation.

It is generally accepted that *adam* is the generic Hebrew term for human being, including both male and female.⁴ Indeed, Gen 5:2 declares that he called *their* name *adam*. On this understanding, male and female were created simultaneously and both are in the image of God. One cannot fail to notice, however, that the Hebrew uses the singular pronoun when it speaks of the creation of *adam*, but the plural when it speaks of male and female. The second account of creation in Genesis 2, clearly claims that the man was created first, and then woman was created from one of his ribs. The two accounts could be harmonized by supposing that Genesis 1 provides the more general statement and Genesis 2 spells out how this happened.⁵ The midrash, *Genesis Rabbah*, entertains but does not accept the possibility that God created Adam double-faced, and then split him to make “two backs” like the androgyne in Plato’s *Symposium*,⁶ so that the original *adam* was both male and female. In the New Testament, Paul says that “a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man.” (1 Cor 11:7). Nonetheless, it seems clear that Genesis 1 envisions binary gender, and accords both male and female the status of “image of God.”

The assertion that women as well as men are created in the image of God is generally, and rightly, hailed in the modern world as remarkably progressive.

But Genesis 1 is also held responsible for much of the “gender trouble” that has beset humanity. The ambiguous use of the word Adam, sometimes for inclusive humanity but sometimes as the proper name of a male, undoubtedly contributes to androcentrism, the tendency to regard the male as normative and the female as a deviation. In fairness, androcentrism is in no way peculiar to the Bible, and has flourished in cultures where the Bible was unknown, but it is problematic in the biblical context nonetheless. We will return to the problem of androcentrism in the following chapter. But the declaration that humanity is “male and female” has also lent support to gender polarization, the assumption that human beings must be unambiguously male or female, and to biological essentialism, the assumption that being male or female entails qualities and dispositions far beyond the what is required by their different roles in procreation.⁷ It is also frequently cited as evidence that the divine plan is that marriage should be between a man and a woman.

It is neither possible nor necessary here to enter into the modern debates about gender and sexuality, and the degree to which they are either determined by biology or culturally constructed.⁸ We must content ourselves with delimiting what the Bible does and does not say on subject. As we have noted already in Chapter One, Genesis 1 is a highly schematic account of creation, sketching its main outlines in a simplified way. To distinguish day and night, or even evening and morning, is not to deny that there is dawn and dusk, when light and darkness are not so clearly distinguished. Equally, to say that human beings are male or female does not address the question whether there are variations in between. Androgynes too are presumably created by God. Genesis says nothing whatsoever about distinctively male or female characteristics, how men and women should dress, wear their hair, and

comport themselves.⁹ Differentiation of social roles will emerge in historical contexts later in the Bible, but they are not specified in the initial account of creation in Genesis 1. Neither does Genesis 1 specify that marriage must be between a man or a woman, or indeed that there should be an institution of marriage at all.

The second creation story, in Genesis 2-3, has more to say on social roles and on the subject of marriage, but again, what it has to say is by no means exhaustive. A man will cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. But we quickly find that many of the protagonists of the biblical narrative, such as Abraham, Moses, or David, not to mention Solomon, cleaved not just to one woman, but to many.¹⁰ We will return to the biblical view of marriage in Chapter 4. For the present it will suffice to note that the biblical account of creation is by no means definitive on the subject.

Before homosexuality

The supposed biblical view that marriage is between a man and a woman is most often invoked in the context of relations between people of the same sex. At the outset, we should remember that the Bible does not have a concept of “homosexuality” as a disposition or orientation. “Homosexuality” in this sense is a modern construct, which arose in the late 19th century.¹¹ (The term was introduced into the English language in 1892, in a translation of a German work that had appeared twenty years earlier.¹² In the influential formulation of Michel Foucault:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the judicial subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage,

a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality . . . Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.¹³

For much of the twentieth century, homosexuality was regarded as a mental disorder,¹⁴ although Freud had firmly declared that “homosexual persons are not sick,” for “would that not oblige us to characterize as sick many great thinkers and scholars of all times whose perverse orientation we know for a fact and whom we admire precisely because of their mental health?”¹⁵ It was finally removed from the official listing of mental disorders of the American Psychiatric Association in 1973.¹⁶ It is now recognized that some people have a homosexual orientation, but it is not clear that a clean line can be drawn between heterosexuals and homosexuals. There is a spectrum of sexual attraction, and attitudes are heavily influenced by cultural context.¹⁷

There are at least some precedents for the modern idea of a homosexual orientation and way of life in the classical world. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes offers a playful explanation of three different sexual orientations. The primeval human being was round, his back and sides forming a circle; he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways. These primeval beings were fearsome, and mounted an attack on the gods. To subdue them, Zeus cut them in two, and made them walk upright on two legs. This division of the original human being is the origin of desire:

Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half. Men who are a section of that double nature which was once called androgynous are lovers of women . . . the women who are a section of the woman do not care for men, but have female attachments . . . But they who are a section of the male follow the male, and while they are young, being slices of the original man, they hang about men and embrace them, and they are themselves the best of boys and youths, because they have the most manly nature.

Aristophanes defends such people against the charge of shamelessness, and waxes rhapsodic about their love:

And when one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself, whether he be a lover of youth or a lover of another sort, the pair are lost in amazement of love and friendship and intimacy, and will not be out of the other's sight, as I may say, even for a moment: these are the people who pass their whole lives together; yet they could not explain what they desire of one another.¹⁸

Plato's categories do not correspond to the modern distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals. They distinguish love between men from love between women, and treat pederasty, the love of boys by adult men, as a special category.¹⁹ Nonetheless, they suggest that sexual orientation is inborn, and determined by a person's make-up. Such theorizing about sexuality was exceptional in antiquity, however, and is not attested at all in the Bible.

The evidence of the Hebrew Bible

Only a few passages in the Hebrew Bible address the question of same sex relations. Some of these are narratives. A story about Lot in the city of Sodom in Genesis 19 gave rise to the name “sodomy” for male homosexual intercourse. Lot, nephew of Abraham, sees two strangers in the city gate. (They turn out to be angels). He insists that they come into his house and not spend the night in the public square. The men of Sodom, however, surround the house and demand that Lot bring out the strangers “so that we may know them.” “To know” is often used as a euphemism for sex, and Lot’s reaction makes clear that this is so here: “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.” To deter them he offers to give them his two virgin daughters, to do to them as they pleased, “only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof” (Gen 19:8). Readers have often assumed that the wicked deed from which Lot wants to deter the men of Sodom is indeed sodomy – intercourse with his male guests. The issue is complicated, however, by a couple of factors. As Lot’s response makes clear, he feels responsible as host for his guests.²⁰ The fact that the people of Sodom wanted to rape *male* guests evidently added to the outrage. But what is involved here is rape, and accordingly the story says nothing about the permissibility of consensual sex between males. The idea that it would be worse to rape a man than to rape a woman persists in Philo, in sophisticated circles in Alexandria around the turn of the era: “If you are guilty of pederasty or adultery or rape of a young person, even of a female, for I need not mention the case of a male . . . the penalty is death” (*Hypothetica* 7.1). Interestingly, the most explicit statement about the sin of Sodom in the Hebrew Bible, in Ezek 16:49, does not mention sex at all: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom; she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and

needy.” The Epistle of Jude, vs. 7, associates Sodom and Gomorrah with sexual immorality, and says that they went after “other flesh,” and 2 Peter 2:6-10 associates them with licentiousness, without further specification. The “other flesh” in Jude may refer to the flesh of angels. The earliest author to condemn the Sodomites for sex between males was Philo of Alexandria (*Abraham* 135).²¹

Lot’s guests were angels, and they could escape by striking the people of Sodom with blindness. Lot’s daughters suffer no ill effects. The woman in a related story in Judges 19 is not so fortunate. This is the concubine of a Levite, who is bringing her back from Bethlehem to the hill country of Ephraim. He stops in Gibeah to spend the night and an old man offers him hospitality. Again, the men of the city, “a perverse lot,” demand that the stranger be brought out so that they might “know” him. The host pleads with them not to do such a vile thing, and offers them his virgin daughter and the stranger’s concubine, to ravish, or do what they wanted with them. The levite thrusts out his concubine. In the morning, the concubine is dead on the doorstep. Here again the story is complicated by the demands of hospitality and the fact that what the people of the city want is rape. Again, the rape of a man seems to be regarded as worse than the rape of a woman, but the story does not address the permissibility of consensual relations.

Also inconclusive is the evidence for homosexual prostitution in connection with cult in ancient Israel. Scholars have speculated that sexual acts were performed with a priest or a priestess as a way of ensuring fertility. This whole theory of sacred marriage has fallen into disrepute in recent years, as it rests on dubious evidence. There are however condemnations in the Bible of

functionaries called *qadesh* (male) and *qedeshah* (female). In Deut 23:17-18 (Heb. 23:18-19) we read:

There shall be no *qedeshah* among the daughters of Israel, nor shall there be a *qadesh* among the sons of Israel. You shall not bring a fee of a harlot (*zonah*) or the pay of a “dog” into the house of the Lord your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both of them are abominable to the Lord your God.

The word *qedeshah* is also associated with *zonah*, prostitute in Gen 38:21-22 and Hosea 4:14. The Hosea passage speaks of sacrificing with *qedeshoth*. The texts give no clear evidence about the role of the *qedeshim*.²² They had quarters in the Jerusalem temple that were destroyed in Josiah’s purge of the cult (2 Kings 23:7). They appear to have a cultic role that was unacceptable to the biblical authors, but the evidence is too unclear to warrant any firm conclusions about their supposed homosexual activity.

The most intriguing story of same-sex love in the Hebrew Bible is undoubtedly that of David and Jonathan. According to 1 Sam 18:1, “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” In 1 Sam 19:1-2, Jonathan warned David that his father Saul planned to kill him, because “Jonathan took great delight in David.” In 1 Sam 20:16-17 Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the Lord seek out the enemies of David.” Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life. In 1 Sam 20:30, Saul’s anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, ‘You son of a perverse, rebellious woman? Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?’ Finally, after Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle with the Philistines, David mourns

Jonathan: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."

The relationship described in these passages has given rise to an enormous amount of literature but little consensus. There is often suspicion that interpretation is guided by the interpreter's predisposition on the question of homosexuality. At no point does the text say explicitly that David and Jonathan had sex. Accordingly, many commentators see here a case of close friendship or male bonding. Martti Nissinen, for example, writes that "it is also possible to interpret David's and Jonathan's love as an intimate camaraderie of two young soldiers with no sexual involvement."²³ He notes that there is no distinction of active and passive roles, as we might expect in a sexual relationship. There are famous parallels for intimate male friendship, in the stories of Gilgamesh and Enkidu from Mesopotamia, and Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's Iliad. Moreover, the rhetoric of love has roots in discourse about treaties and covenants in the ancient Near East. Covenant partners, whether equal or unequal, were said to love each other, and referred to each other using language of kinship, such as "brother."²⁴ "Love" in this context essentially meant loyalty. David and Jonathan are explicitly said to have made a covenant in 1 Samuel 20. David appeals to Jonathan to "deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought your servant into a sacred covenant with you" (1 Sam 20:8). In light of this, some commentators suggest that the love has a political dimension: it prepares the way for David to take over the kingdom of Saul.²⁵ Two statements in the text, however, suggest a more emotional or erotic relationship. One is Saul's complaint that Jonathan has chosen David to his shame and the shame of his mother's nakedness (1 Sam 20:30). It is possible that the shame here arises from Jonathan's

disloyalty to his father, and implicitly to the mother who bore him, but it may also have sexual implications. The other is David's statement that the love of Jonathan was better than the love of women.

Nissinen remarks, aptly enough, that "the text thus leaves the possible homoerotic associations to the reader's imagination."²⁶ Homosexual love, however, like heterosexual love, is about much more than sex. It is about emotional bonding, fidelity and emotion, and all of these seem to be in evidence in the case of David and Jonathan. Some interpreters assume that the biblical heroes could not have consummated their love because "homosexual acts were condemned in Israelite law (Lev 20:13). So David's apologists would hardly have described him as homosexual or included a piece that described him that way."²⁷ But this judgment is problematic on two counts. First, as we shall see, the condemnation of homosexual acts is found only in one distinctive strand of biblical law, and it is not at all certain the author or editor of the books of Samuel would have been constrained by it. Second, even Leviticus does not condemn love between males in the emotional sense, and even the specific sex acts that are forbidden are a subject of dispute.

The prohibition in Leviticus

Homosexual acts are explicitly condemned in only two verses of the Hebrew Bible. Lev 18:22 reads: "You shall not lie with a male the lyings of a woman; it is an abomination." Lev 20:13 specifies the penalty for this: "If a man lies with a male the lyings of a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall be put to death. Their blood is upon them." These verses are in the Holiness Code, a sub-section of the Book of Leviticus and of

the priestly laws, usually dated to the Babylonian Exile, although the evidence for dating is not very clear.

The first question here is what is meant by “the lyings of a woman.” The corresponding phrase, “the lying of a male” occurs a number of times in the books of Numbers and Judges (Num 31:17, 18, 35; Judg 21:11-12). In Judges, a virgin girl is defined as one “who has not known a man with respect to the lying of a male.” In Numbers also a virgin is one who has not known the lying of a male. The “lying of a male,” then, appears to mean vaginal intercourse. Saul Olyan argues by analogy that the “lyings of a woman” must refer to anal intercourse, and that this is the only activity between males that is prohibited in Leviticus.²⁸ Friedman and Dolansky, in contrast, note that while “the lying of a male” is always singular, “the lyings of a woman” are plural. They infer that more than one kind of sexual activity is involved.²⁹ We might also note that the passages that speak of the lying of a man speak of the woman “knowing” or experiencing it. Leviticus speaks rather of a man who lies the lyings of a woman, not a man who lies with a man the lying of a male. This might suggest that a man who lies the lyings of a woman is one who plays the role of the woman in sex. Both partners, however, are judged worthy of death.

On any interpretation, this law is exceptional in the ancient Near East. The only parallel is provided by a Middle Assyrian Law:

If a man lie with his neighbor, when they have prosecuted him and convicted him, they shall lie with him and turn him into a eunuch.³⁰

In this case, however, the issue seems to be the subjugation of the “neighbor,” presumably a man of equal status, rather than the homosexual activity, which is repeated in the punishment. In Greece, it was considered shameful for a man of status to be penetrated, but not to be the penetrator. Plato, in the *Laws*,

regarded as “womanly” men who played the role of the woman (*Laws* 837 C), and Plutarch, writing in the Roman era, allowed no respect or friendship to those who played the passive role (*Moralia* 768 E). Leviticus, however, condemns both parties to death.

Remarkably there is no law on relations between women. It can hardly be that love between women was not known in Israel or Judah. Also, it is not the case that the authors were indifferent to what women did. Lev 18:23, the verse immediately after the prohibition against lying with a male, forbids relations with an animal, but specifies that it is equally forbidden for a woman to give herself to an animal. So the question arises, how did sex between males differ from sex between females?

The most obvious answer to this question is that it involved the ejaculation of semen. This suggests that the problem is waste of seed. Yet there is no mention of seed in this passage, and that other actions that involve a waste of seed, such as sex with a pregnant woman, are not prohibited. (Neither is masturbation. The problem with Onan in Genesis 38 is that he fails to honor the law of levirate marriage, which required him to raise up a son for his dead brother). Alternatively, since a mingling of bodily fluids is involved, the issue might concern purity, perhaps because of the mingling of semen and excrement. (Excrement is not regarded as defiling in biblical law, but Ezekiel expresses revulsion when he is asked to cook his food over human dung in Ezek 4:12-13). So none of the explanations on offer is entirely satisfactory, although each of them may still have some validity.

It is important in any case to see these laws in the context of the Holiness Code and of Leviticus more generally. The tone for many of the purity laws is set by the list of forbidden foods in Leviticus 11. An animal that has divided

hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud, is permitted. Such an animal is “normal.” But those that chew the cud but do not have divided hoofs (such as the camel), or have divided hoofs but do not chew the cud (such as the pig) are declared unclean. Mary Douglas famously argued that the problem was that the impure animals were regarded as anomalous, or rather that anomalous animals, that deviated from some norm, were regarded as impure.³¹ This kind of reasoning too may play a part in the prohibition of sexual relations between males, but it does not explain why the prohibition is not extended to women. Relations between women would seem to be as anomalous as relations between men.

John Boswell claimed that the Hebrew word *toevah*, abomination, “does not usually signify something intrinsically evil, like rape or theft . . . but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation.³² But this is misleading.³³ Leviticus recognizes occasions of ritual uncleanness that are not sinful, such childbirth, seminal emission, heterosexual intercourse and menstruation. In these cases, purification is accomplished through ritual means, sacrifice and washing.³⁴ The word *toevah* is not used to refer to them. It is used for a wide range of offences, many of them moral in nature (murder, lying, robber).³⁵

In the New Testament, Paul dispensed Gentile Christians from following the food laws of Leviticus. Many of the specific laws are generally disregarded in the modern world, except by the Ultra-Orthodox. Lev 19:19 says “you shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials. Few people in the modern world regard these commandments as binding. This does not mean that all commandments in Leviticus can be

disregarded. Moral laws such as we find in the Ten Commandments are interspersed with the ritual laws of Leviticus 19. But it shows that laws are not automatically binding because they are found in the Bible. Anyone who argues that Lev 18:22 is binding but 19:19 is not needs to provide a rationale for this prioritization.

The most striking thing the Hebrew Bible on the subject of same-sex relations, however, is how little it has to say. The Prophets have nothing to say about it. Neither do the sages who compiled the Wisdom Literature, or the scribes who edited Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. The fact that the subject is addressed explicitly in only two verses, in a distinctive strand of Priestly Law, shows that it is a marginal concern in the Hebrew Bible.

The New Testament

In the New Testament, too, we find large swathes of material that do not address homosexual relations at all. Jesus never touches on the subject, in any of the Gospels.³⁶ The exceptions are in the writings of Paul. The most important passage is found in Romans chapter 1. The passage begins by declaring that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against those who suppress the truth. Ever since the creation, the power and nature of God have been visible through the things he has made. Therefore, those who do not acknowledge him are without excuse. Paul draws here on an argument that is also found in the Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish Hellenistic work from the early first century CE. Wisdom is more sympathetic to the Gentiles, allowing that they may have tried to find God but gone astray. Paul, however, regards them

as culpable. Because they failed to acknowledge God, he punished them. The manner of punishment, however, is startling:

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves . . . Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Same-sex relations here are said to be a punishment: God gave them up to their lusts. The punishment consists in deviation from nature, from the order of creation.

Natural and unnatural

Paul enters here into a discourse on nature that had a long history in Greek philosophy, dating back to the Sophists in the fifth century, and no precedent in the Hebrew Bible. While Plato had written positively about homosexual relations in the *Symposium*, in his last work, the *Laws*, he wrote:

I think that the pleasure is to be deemed natural which arises out of the intercourse between men and women, but that the intercourse of men with men, or of women with women, is contrary to nature, and that the bold attempt was originally due to unbridled lust (*Laws* 1.636).

Later (*Laws* 4. 836) he adduces the animals as proof that such unions were monstrous, although the behavior of animals was a matter of dispute.³⁷ In Greco-Roman culture generally “natural” sexual relations involved a superior active partner and an inferior passive partner (boys, women, slaves). Sexual relations between women, accordingly, were “unnatural.”³⁸ The contrast

between “in accordance with nature” and “contrary to nature” figures prominently in Greco-Roman popular philosophy. For example, a character in Plutarch’s *Dialogue on Love* disparages union with males as contrary to nature, as contrasted with the love between men and women, which characterized as natural.³⁹

Hellenistic Jewish literature generally maintained a hard line against homosexual relations, especially relations between males. One of the most explicit passages on the subject is found in Pseudo-Phocylides, a collection of moralizing sayings that probably dates to the first century CE:

Do not outrage your wife for shameful ways of intercourse.

Do not transgress the natural limits of sexuality for unlawful sex,

For even animals are not pleased by intercourse of male with male,

And let not women imitate the sexual role of men.

Do not deliver yourself wholly unto unbridled sensuality towards your wife.

For eros is not a god, but a passion destructive of all. (Pseudo-Phocylides 189-94).⁴⁰

Philo of Alexandria uses the expression “contrary to nature” (*para physin*) with reference to relations between a man and a woman in her menstrual period, relations between a man and a boy, and relations between different species of animals (*On the Special Laws* 3.7-82). His primary concerns seem to be for procreation and clear distinctions between species.⁴¹ Josephus writes:

The Law recognizes no sexual connections, except the natural union of man and wife, and that only for the procreation of children. But it abhors the intercourse of males with males and punishes any who undertake such a thing with death. (*Against Apion* 2. 199).

In Paul's time, the categorization of homosexual practices as *para physin* was commonplace in the world of Hellenistic Judaism.⁴² Paul writes in a Hellenistic Jewish cultural context.

While various female acts (or even positions) might be construed as imitating the sexual role of men, and therefore unnatural, most interpreters agree that Paul is referring to sex between women in Rom 1:26. The word "likewise" in the following verse clearly refers to sex between men. Moreover, this is the type of sexual relations most frequently called "contrary to nature" in the contemporary Greco-Roman literature.⁴³ It seems clear then that Paul condemns lesbianism as well as male homoerotic relations.

Some interpreters have suggested that Paul was only objecting to heterosexuals who performed homosexual acts.⁴⁴ But Paul does not recognize homosexuals as a category at all. For him everyone is heterosexual, and all homosexual acts are expressions of lust. This understanding is clearly deficient by modern lights, but the apostle was a man of his time. Again, others have suggested that Paul's objection was to pederasty, sex between men and boys, which is normally understood as abuse in the modern world, but was widely practiced in Greek and Roman culture.⁴⁵ But Paul, like Leviticus, holds both active and passive parties equally responsible, and liable for the death penalty. Unlike Philo, Paul was not concerned about procreation, as we shall see in the next chapter. Neither was he concerned about purity laws, such as those involving menstruating women. He may well have been influenced by the prohibition of sex between males in Leviticus, and he was surely influenced by Greco-Roman conceptions of what was natural and unnatural.

But Paul's attempt to argue on the basis of nature is not very satisfactory. As John J. Winkler comments with regard to distinctions of natural and

unnatural in Greek culture: “what ‘natural’ means in many such contexts is precisely ‘conventional and proper.’ The word ‘unnatural’ in contexts of human behavior quite regularly means ‘seriously unconventional.’”⁴⁶ The point can be illustrated easily from 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul strains to make an argument that any woman who prays or prophesies should veil her head. “Judge for yourself,” he writes. “Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering” (1 Cor 11: 13-15). But nature only teaches this in specific cultural contexts. In the United States of America, nature stopped teaching that long hair was degrading for a man in the 1960’s. Paul himself seems to have sensed the weakness of his argument, for he concludes: “But if anyone is disposed to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.” Custom, not nature, is what was at stake, and this was no less true in Romans 1, on the subject of same-sex relations.

The Greek terms arsenokoitai and malakoi

Apart from the passage in Romans, the only other places in the New Testament that condemn same sex relations are 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. As translated in the NRSV, 1 Cor 6:9-10 reads:

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.

The Greek word translated here as “male prostitutes” is *malakoi*, literally soft people (masculine). To call them “male prostitutes” is clearly an over-

interpretation. The word is widely used, with a wide range of meanings. A male who allowed himself to be penetrated might be characterized as “soft,” but the word cannot be restricted to this meaning. In a sexual context, it means “effeminate.”⁴⁷ It is unlikely, however, that Paul was condemning people for their disposition or just for an effeminate lifestyle. He most probably used the word in its narrower sense of passive sexual partner.

The Greek word translated “sodomite” in the NRSV, *arsenokoitai*, is more controversial. It recurs in list of evildoers in 1 Timothy 1:10. The Greek word is a compound of *arsen*, male, and *koite*, bed. John Boswell argued that the first term denotes the subject, and so the sense would be “a male lying,” that is, a man having intercourse, suggesting a fornicator or a male prostitute.⁴⁸ But the word is probably coined on the basis of the Greek translation of Lev 20:13: *meta arsenos koiten gynaikos* (with a male, the couch of a woman).⁴⁹ The objection is raised that the meaning of a word is not necessarily determined by its etymology. In the *Sibylline Oracles* 2.70-77 the verb *arsenokeitein* occurs in connection with other terms that relate to injustice rather than to sexual offences.⁵⁰ But the *Sibylline Oracles* regularly include male homosexuality in lists of vices. In *Sib Or* 3.185 this is expressed as “male will approach male.” In *Sib Or* 3:595-6, the Jews are praised because they “are mindful of holy wedlock and do not engage in impious intercourse with male children.” Again, in *Sib Or* 3:764 the Sibyl urges people to “avoid adultery and indiscriminate intercourse with males.” Since warnings against male homosexual intercourse is a *topos* in Sibylline literature, there can be little doubt about the meaning of *arsenokoitai* in *Sibylline Oracles* 2, or indeed in Paul. The word suggests an allusion to Leviticus, but Paul’s position on the subject is absolutely in conformity with the prevalent position in Hellenistic Judaism.

Conclusion

In the New Testament, as in the Old, we find explicit condemnation of homosexual acts, but only in a few passages, in the Pauline and pseudo-Pauline epistles.⁵¹ Neither Jesus nor the evangelists have anything at all to say on the subject, and this should raise questions about the importance of homosexuality as an issue in the biblical world. Moreover, Paul's comments are clearly indebted to the Hellenistic cultural context, and to the assumptions of Hellenistic Jews. The Bible provides no direct support for gay rights in a modern context. Anyone who wishes to use the Bible to argue for gay rights would have to argue from the general command to love our neighbor, and would then have to face the difficulties of determining what love of the neighbor requires. But modern discussions of gender and sexuality provide a very different context for this issue than what is envisioned in the Bible. Many other considerations besides the few scriptural passages we have discussed would have to be taken into account in a responsible discussion of the ethics of homosexuality.

¹ W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness. Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 144.

² See Phyllis Bird, 'Male and Female He Created Them.' Genesis 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," in eadem, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities. Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 123-54, especially 134-6.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴ Garr, *In His Own Image*, 128.

⁵ See James Barr, "One Man, or All Humanity? A Question in the Anthropology of Genesis 1," in Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, *Recycling Biblical Figures* (Leiden: Deo, 1999) 3-21, especially p.7, citing the medieval exegete Rashi.

⁶ BeReshith Rabbah 8.1. *Symposium* 189: “the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking in opposite ways.”

⁷ On biological essentialism, gender polarization, and androcentrism see Sandra L. Bem, *The Lenses of Gender. Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale, 1993). She discusses the influence of Genesis on pp. 43-9.

⁸ The essentialist view that sexuality is essentially genetic is assumed by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980) and vigorously defended by Michael B. Regele, *Science, Scripture, and Same-Sex Love* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014) 31-62. For the constructivist view see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1. An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London: Routledge, 1990) 41-53; David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, ed., *Before Sexuality. The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 5-7.

⁹ In contrast, a Roman physiognomist, Polemo, wrote in the second century CE: “You may obtain physiognomic indications of masculinity and femininity from your subject’s glance, movement, and voice, and then, from among these signs, compare one with another until you determine to your satisfaction which of these two sexes prevails. For in the masculine there is something feminine to be found, and in the feminine something masculine, but the name masculine or feminine is assigned according to which of the two prevails.” (Polemo, *Physiognomy* 2,1.192F, cited by Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 15.

¹⁰ David Petersen, “Genesis and Family Values,” *JBL* 124 (2005) 5-23, especially 16-17, on Abraham, Sarah and Hagar.

¹¹ See Bem, *Lenses of Gender*, 87-101; David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988) 301-454; Regele, *Science, Scripture, and Same-Sex Love*, 34-60.

¹² Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 15.

¹³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, 43.

¹⁴ Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 397-433.

¹⁵ Freud in a Viennese newspaper in 1903, quoted in Bem, *Lenses of Gender*, 90.

¹⁶ Bem, *Lenses of Gender*, 101.

¹⁷ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 5-10.

¹⁸ Plato, *Symposium* 192, trans Benjamin Jowett. See further John Thorp, “The Social Construction of Homosexuality,” *Phoenix* 46(1992) 54-65.

¹⁹ Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 19-21.

²⁰ Friedman and Dolansky comment that “offering your daughters for rape is far beyond what almost anyone in any culture would consider to be an obligation of hospitality,” *The Bible Now*, 7.

²¹ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice. Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 91, infers that Jesus would have been aware of the homoerotic dimension of the story, but the inference is gratuitous.

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- ²² Other references can be found in 1 Kings 15:12; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14. See Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 41.
- ²³ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 55.
- ²⁴ Saul Olyan, "Surpassing the Love of Women': Another Look at 2 Samuel 1:26 and the Relationship of David and Jonathan," in idem, *Social Inequality in the World of the Text. The Significance of Ritual and Social Distinctions in the Hebrew Bible* (Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011) 85-100, especially 85-88. See the classic article of William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963) 77-87. An example is found in the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon, which is widely thought to have influenced the Book of Deuteronomy.
- ²⁵ Anthony Heacock, *Jonathan Loved David. Manly Love in the Bible and The Hermeneutics of Sex* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011) 35-55 provides a good overview of scholarship.
- ²⁶ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 56.
- ²⁷ Steven L. McKenzie, *King David. A Biography* (New York: Oxford, 2000) 85.
- ²⁸ Saul Olyan, "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," in his book *Social Inequality in the World of the Text*, 57-83, especially 63.
- ²⁹ Friedman and Dolansky, *The Bible Now*, 22.
- ³⁰ Middle Assyrian Law 20. Friedman and Dolansky, 31.
- ³¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Praeger, 1966).
- ³² Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 100.
- ³³ Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, 195.
- ³⁴ On the distinction between moral and ritual impurity see Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford, 2000) 21-42. The distinction is not always satisfactory when applied to sexual matters.
- ³⁵ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practices*, 119. The word certainly signifies disapproval, but Gagnon's characterization of the abhorrent quality of the acts in question is overstated.
- ³⁶ Gagnon, in his zeal to affirm a biblical condemnation of homosexuality, can only say that "Jesus did not overturn any prohibitions against immoral sexual behavior in Leviticus on anywhere else (*The Bible and Homosexual Practices*, 227), but he did not affirm them either.
- ³⁷ Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996) 273. Aristotle records same sex contact between animals (*History of Animals* 6. 680-1).
- ³⁸ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 251.
- ³⁹ See further Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," *Journal of Christian Ethics* 14(1986) 184-215, especially 192-3.
- ⁴⁰ See P. W. van der Horst, *The Sayings of Pseudo-Phocylides* (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 237-41.
- ⁴¹ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 246-7.
- ⁴² Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 387.
- ⁴³ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 248-51.
- ⁴⁴ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109; John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (3rd ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1988) 53-6.

⁴⁵ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 117; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 52-83.

⁴⁶ John J. Winkler, "Unnatural Acts: Erotic Protocols in Artemidoros' *Dream Analysis*," in idem, *The Constraints of Desire. The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1990) 17.

⁴⁷ Dale B. Martin, "Arsenokoites and Malakos. Meanings and Consequences," in idem, *Sex and the Single Savior. Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 44.

⁴⁸ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 341-53.

⁴⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 382. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 107-8, suggested that the word is derived from the Hebrew expression used for male homosexual relations in rabbinic literature, *mishkav zakur*, "lying with a male," but it is doubtful that that expression would have been known to Paul.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 40.

⁵¹ *1 Timothy* is one of the Pastoral Epistles, written perhaps in the second century but almost certainly not by Paul.