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Homosexuality

The Greek term *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος = consubstantial; of the same substance) was used occasionally by gnostic authors and their opponents in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Valentinus, Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus) to express the broad notion that two or more things belong to the same class or category of being. It achieved widespread attention through its unexpected and controversial inclusion in the creedal formula drafted against Arius at the Council of Nicaea (325) which called the Son *homoousios* with the Father. The term’s precise meaning in this text has been a matter of considerable scholarly debate. The older view, according to which it indicated monarchian tendencies among some synod members, is now largely discredited. It is more likely that it was introduced to reject Arius’ subordination of the Son to the Father, although pragmatic and political considerations may have played a part as well (Stead: 242–66). After Nicaea, the term remained controversial for much of the 4th century; even pro-Nicene theologians, such as Athanasius and the Cappadocians, used it only sparingly.

One frequently advanced argument against the *homoousios* makes much of its unscriptural character (Athanasius, Decr. 21). From its earliest attestations, however, the term *homoousios* often occurred in the context of biblical exegesis. According to Clement of Alexandria, gnostics understood the phrase “likeness” in Gen 1:26 as referring to a psychic element that was *homoousios* with God and breathed into man at creation. Origen apparently read Heb 1:3 in combination with Wis 7:25 to yield the notion that there was “a common substance” of Father and Son inasmuch as an “effluent is *homoousios* with the body from which it is an emanation or a vapor” (Pamphilus, *Apologia pro Origene* 1.5).

To justify the use of *homoousios* in the Nicene Creed, Athanasius mainly cited biblical passages proving the intimate union of Father and Son (Ps 45:1; 110:3; John 1:18; 6:46; 8:42; 10:30; 14:10). Gregory of Nyssa similarly used Phil 2:6 as a scriptural starting point to expound the term’s meaning (*Antirrheticus* 20, GNO III/1.159; cf. Mateo-Seco: 401). Occasionally, however, the attempt was made to demonstrate the word’s scriptural character by pointing to the use of cognates in the Bible. Thus, Athanasius cited Exod 3:14; Jer 23:18, 22; Heb 1:3; and Jer 9:10 to argue that the various Greek equivalents of “being” and “existence” employed in those verses all had the same meaning and thereby proved that “they of Nicaea breathe the spirit of Scripture” (*Ep. Afr.* 4). Marius Victorinus referred to the same passages (*De homoousio recipiendo*) 2 and, in addition, to Matt 6:11, which he understood (along with John 6:58) as a petition for “life from the same substance” (*Adv. Arium* 2.3 [8]).


Johannes Zachhuber

### Homosexuality

**I. Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament**

1. The Concept of “Homosexuality” and Ancient Sources. Eastern and biblical sources sometimes describe love and erotic-sexual interaction between people of the same sex. To bring all this under the rubric of “homosexuality” is anachronism, however, because the concept of homosexuality implies an interpretation of gender different from that of the ancient sources.

The modern categories of homo-, bi-, and heterosexuality are based on the idea of “sexuality,” which is the product of the sexological research conducted since the last part of the 19th century CE. The underlying assumption of an individual sexual orientation is unknown to the ancient sources which do not categorize human gender and sexual behavior accordingly. Instead, they describe or presuppose same-sex interaction from a variety of perspectives, reflecting the gender politics of their own cultures. The issue is not same-sex interaction as such but (masculine) gender hierarchy and appropriate sexual roles within the patriarchal social
V. Christianity

A. Patristics and Orthodox Churches

While it remains a point of contention whether they could conceive of “homosexuality” as an erotic orientation to members of the same gender, Christians of the patristic period accepted several passages in the canonical Scriptures as condemnations of same-sex genital acts, most importantly the story of Sodom (Gen 19) and Paul’s account of gentle error in Rom 1:18–32. These scriptural references contributed to the formation of Christian sexual ethics. For example, in Paed. 2.10, Clement of Alexandria cites Gen 19:5; Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26–28, and the Epistle of Barnabas in condemning all non-reproductive sex acts, including those between males. But same-sex acts could be singled out for special condemnation. Ambrose comes close to articulating a notion of same-sex orientation, arguing that the angels who came to Sodom took the form of men because all the male inhabitants of the city preferred the appearance of men (Abr. 1.49). Thus, for Ambrose, the inhospitality of the Sodomites is a direct outcome of unbridled same-sex attraction.

In Romans, Paul used the relative acceptance of same-sex activity in Hellenistic society as evidence for the dishonor that proceeded from idolatry. This became a trope for later polemicists who wished to contrast the sexual restraint of Christians with the purported laxity of “pagans.” While the use of Scripture in anti-pagan polemic was necessarily limited, in Cel. 7.49, Origen echoes Rom 1:27b (“men committed shameless acts with men”) while contrasting the moral superiority of simple Christians to pagan philosophers. The idea that same-sex acts are a blatant rejection of God could also be linked to anti-Jewish polemic. In his Comm. Isa., Jerome explains Isa 3:9b (“they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it”) in terms of the demand made by the Sodomites at Lot’s door: educ foras viros, ut concumbamus cum eis (Gen 19:5b). The wording here is more explicit than that of the MT or even the Vg. Jerome likens these words to the cries reported in the gospel, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” (Luke 23:21), effectively equating explicitly articulated same-sex desire with cheering on the death of Jesus. The comment is paralleled in pseudo-Basil’s Enarratio in Isaia.

While Bernadette Brooten finds patristic writers who denounce same-sex acts between women, few of them rely on Scripture for support. The most notable exceptions are Chrysostom’s comments on Rom 1:26b in his Hom. Rom. 4, and Ambrosiaster’s remarks on the same verse in the ω-recension of his Commentarius in Epistolam Paulinam. In the β- and γ-recensions of this work, he argues that the passage refers to “irregular” heterosexual activity.


Michael F. Pettinger
his 860 treatise on the divorce of King Lothaire of Lorraine, encompassed various non-procreative sex acts with partners of either sex, together with some procreative ones undertaken with illicit partners (Boswell: 203–4).

Hincmar’s approach emulated one of three competing patristic lines about the nature of Sodomitic sin: sexual activity undertaken primarily, or exclusively, for the purpose of satisfying libidinous desire rather than procreation. This view is evident, e.g., in Gregory the Great’s references to Sodom’s “crimes of the flesh” in his *Moralia of Job* (Jordan: 35–6). Another, perhaps more persuasive (but less popular) gloss on the text of Gen 19, appears in Origen, and again in Ambrose: inhospitality or violence toward guests (Boswell: 98). Ambrose also advocated yet a third account, a more general brand of arrogantly excessive licentiousness as the explanation for Sodom’s destruction. So did many other patristic figures. Thus, John Cassian suggested gluttony as the fundamental sin (Boswell: 98), and Jerome suggested unapologetic pride in self-indulgent luxury, bloatness (*saturia*), language which Gregory also echoes in his broader references to the prevalence of *luxuria* in Sodom (Jordan: 32–40).

Among patristic figures, only Augustine suggested, once, that Sodom warranted “a torrent of fire” because “it was a place where sexual intercourse between males had become so commonplace that it received the license usually extended by law to other practices” (*Civ.* 16.30). But even Augustine was more concerned with the damaging effects of inordinate (or disordered) desire more broadly speaking, as laid out in his account of the significance of the fall in *Civ.* 14.10–26. The prevalence of male-male sexual intercourse in Sodom would have been, even for Augustine, merely symptomatic of libidinous passions allowed to run riot.

The narrowing of focus which eventually recast the sins of the Sodomites as not just specifically sexual, but more specifically homosexual, can probably be traced to three historical factors: (1) the cult of Pelagius, the early 10th-century boy saint, as perpetuated in Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim’s mid-10th century account of his martyrdom at the hands of the Caliph of Cordoba (Jordan: 10–28); (2) Peter Damian’s polemic, written a century later (ca. 1050), against mutual sexual gratification among monks, and more generally against clerical predation of adolescent boys (*Book of Gomorrah*; Jordan: 45–66); and (3) the gradual association of homosexual acts with the destruction of entire cities, owing to the perceived parallel with Sodom (Puff: 17–30; esp. 26–27).

Hrotsvitha emphasized Pelagius’ adolescent beauty, and the Caliph of Cordoba’s carnal desire, which she characterizes expressly as Sodomitic vice. By also emphasizing Cordoba’s reputation for sybaritic luxury, she unified for her readers the two main threads of patristic interpretation of the sin of Sodom: sensory self-indulgence broadly understood, and sexual licentiousness in particular, conjoined now with an image of predatory pederasty as Sodomitic vice’s exemplar. Finally, by emphasizing Cordoba’s Islamic cultural otherness, she attributes an alien nature to Sodomites.

Peter Damian’s work, which can perhaps be credited with the first coinage of the nominative form of the sin (sodomy; *sodomia*), could be construed as a more systematic theological elaboration of Hrotsvitha’s focus on misdirected erotic desire. He emphasized, however, the “unnaturalness” of male-male erotic intimacy in its own right, independently of its procreative failings. He thus advocated a novel ordinal ranking among sexual sins, ranking all same-sex erotic liaisons as more spiritually degrading than opposite-sex fornication, or even bestiality. But his brief for prosecuting such acts did not secure adherents among his contemporaries, in part due to the zealotry of his own language. It came to fruition in later centuries however, as people came to be more accustomed to the idea of ranking sexual sins (see Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II.II.q.154.a12), and as the church began to feel serious social pressure to institute clerical reforms, an issue which became further magnified by the rise of Protestantism.

The final element, the scriptural linkage between prevalence of “Sodomitic” acts and the fate of entire cities, came into its own first in systematic prosecution of same-sex acts in Florence and Venice during the 15th century – in Florence as a response to the city’s pre-existing reputation for licentiousness, and fear of the long-term spiritual and material consequences of the underlying reality which bore out the reputation. In Venice, the impetus may have been more closely associated with Venice’s vulnerability to floods and epidemics.

In both Florence and Venice the standard of punishment (mostly fines) was much milder than the public burnings that began to mount in Germanic cities north of the Alps in the 16th century. The Protestant Reformation added a new layer of urgency to these urban contagion models of sodomy: the Catholic church was regarded as corrupt in part because of the connection Peter Damian had drawn centuries earlier between clerical sexual practices and the condemnation of Sodom, now understood as a metaphor for the Roman church itself. The Protestant burghers of German cities newly independent of Rome’s influence thus had to concern themselves with the prospect of religious as well as moral contagion in their midst, which made their efforts to stamp out sodomy all the more fevered.

Through the centuries covered by medieval Europe and the Reformation, there was a trend line binding same-sex erotic acts to a dominant interpretation of the significance of Gen 19. That inter-
Homosexuality

pretation is nonetheless contentious. Compare, e.g., the non-response in medieval Christianity to the “sin of the Benjamites” at Gibeah in Judg 19 (Jordan: 30–31; Boswell: 93–97). More importantly, the trend was not monolithic. There were always counter-weighing social elements – homoerotic Italian Renaissance art, e.g., or Dante’s treatment of Sodomites in Inferno and Purgatorio.

Dante is puzzling in two respects. First, following Thomas Aquinas’ classification of sexual sins, crafted less than half a century earlier, Dante lodges Sodomites pretty far down in hell, on a burning plain with blasphemers (violent against God) and usurers (violent against industry; see Gen 3:19). The Sodomites, wandering through an endless fiery rain (intentionally evoking the fate of Sodom), are in hell for the sin of violence against themselves, against their own nature. Yet in Purgatorio we find Sodomites on the same level as the most common-place of sinners, the heterosexually lustful, at the top penitential level of Mount Purgatory. The shift is as dramatic as the temporal and conceptual distance between Aquinas and Hincmar. Moreover, while Dante’s pilgrim is scornful of many of the denizens of hell as unworthy of respect, he is quite sympathetic to the Sodomites he meets on the burning plain. (See Pequigney for an attempt to reconcile these disparities.)

Dante’s disparate treatment of same-sex eroticism in the two works is a useful reminder that there were complicating nuances even during an era that was becoming increasingly hostile to acts motivated by same-sex desire.

Bibliography. 


Richard Nunan

C. Modern Europe and America

While same-sex erotic acts have always existed, it is now generally accepted that the grouping of specific sexual practices, structures of desire, gendered behaviors, and psychosocial identifications associated with the term “homosexuality” is a modern European innovation. Famously, the term first appeared published in Leipzig, Germany in 1869 – but with minimal elaboration. Psychiatrists and physicians such as Karl Westphal and Sigmund Freud fleshed out the concept in the decades that followed; thus “homosexuality” emerged as a historically and culturally specific formation, “the unstable conjunction of ... a psychological condition, an erotic desire, and a sexual practice” (Halperin: 131; cf. Foucault).

Exegetical connections between this cultural formation and Scripture were variable and not always obvious. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah continued to underwrite (loosely) the legal designation of “sodomy.” Thus “sodomy” was the operative category in the infamous 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde; and Marcel Proust explicitly linked the term l’homosexualité to allusions to the Sodom story in the opening to Sodom and Gomorrah (1921). But it should be noted that “sodomy” was a term inherited from medieval usage that was itself not fully coherent nor always restricted to same-sex eroticism (Jordan 1997). Similarly, in 19th century Europe, it was still possible (if not necessarily common) to interpret the “unnatural” relations of women in Rom 1:26 as a reference to anal or oral sex between a woman and a man (Brooten: 189).

In the 20th century, a group of specific biblical passages came to occupy pride of place in European and American debates regarding homosexuality, both ecclesial and scholarly. These included, most commonly, Gen 19:1–29; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:18–32; 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:10. Also relevant was Gen 1–3, read as a divinely-ordained template for gender complementarity. In 1980, the publication of John Boswell’s Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality marked a major intervention, calling for a rethinking of the relevant scriptural texts – even if many of Boswell’s specific arguments have since been called into question. Subsequent revisionist readings of Scripture have increasingly focused on murky questions of translation and on the historical specificity of the cultural logics (often deeply androcentric) that undergird the biblical texts (Martin).

In light of these shifts, changes in exegetical sensibilities can be observed, even among traditionalist Christians who maintain the Bible’s unambiguous condemnation of homosexuality – e.g., the receding of the Sodom story as a central prooftext (Jordan 2011: 195). Traditionalist exegetical arguments continue to be made (Hays: 379–403; Gagnon). At the same time, some Christians in conservative denominations (such as evangelical Protestantism) have begun to build on mainstream biblical scholarship to develop constructive theological arguments for the affirmation of certain same-sex relationships in ways that would have been inconceivable only a few decades ago (e.g., Brownson; Vines).