

THE BIBLICAL ATTITUDE TO HOMOSEXUALITY AGAINST ITS ANCIENT BACKGROUND*

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I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Homosexuality is, strictly speaking, not a modern phenomenon, but has in recent decades drawn considerable attention from moral philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, theologians, medical experts, lawyers and others. Because traditionally the western world has had a so to speak 'Christian outlook', homosexuality has not been a major problem, i.e. a philosophical, ethical, or sociological question of controversial nature, on which opinions have been greatly divided. The practising homosexual understood himself or herself to be on the fringe of society, outside the pale of propriety, accepting the condemnation of society without demur.

In more recent times, however, along with many other voices from various minority groups, or groups which traditionally have been oppressed or discriminated against, homosexuals have raised their voices demanding recognition.¹ This new state of affairs implies not merely that society should show understanding towards the homosexual and refrain from the traditional 'holier-than-thou' attitude, but that society should recognise the homosexual way of life as a perfectly normal one and on the same level as the heterosexual relation. Until a couple of decades ago homosexuality was often regarded as a mental illness. This argument is not prominent anymore; now the claim is made that homosexuality is just as normal a way of life, and sometimes, in fact, that it is even truer and deeper than the heterosexual one.² Though it would seem that proponents of homosexuality are not agreed on a united line of argument, arguments

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1 On the 'Gay rights movement', see the brief account in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, Vol. 6 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 30-31.

2 Cf. Gilbert Herdt, 'Homosexuality', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 6 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 451-52: 'Over the past century homosexuality has undergone a dramatic transformation, from the turn-of-the-century "disease of effeminacy" to the modern gay rights movement.'

from, for example, ethics, medicine, and not least theology, are marshalled to its support. Today homosexuality has become a real issue both for church and society. For society, on account of its social and judicial implications, and for the church, on account of its open infiltration of it and, according to many, its conflict with the teaching of the Bible. The claim is now made that the biblical view is irrelevant today, or that the Bible condemns such forms of homosexuality as ancient cultic homosexuality or pederasty, but not the deeper form of homosexual love with which we are concerned today.

In this paper I shall deal only with the theological issue. I shall briefly take up the various types of homosexuality that were in existence in the ancient world, with which the biblical authors were acquainted, and then proceed to consider exegetically the significance and application of the pertinent biblical statements.

II. PROSTITUTION AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Through clay-tablets, inscriptions, paintings, as well as ancient authors, it has become well-known that ancient Near Eastern societies practised, in addition to common prostitution, female cultic prostitution and cultic male homosexuality.

It is not possible within the limits of this essay to go at length into a discussion of the immense and often, for details, complicated evidence about male and female prostitution in the ancient world. Hence, I will content myself with illustrating briefly by means of ancient documents the occurrence of this phenomenon throughout the ancient Near East.

It should be borne in mind that the life of ancient societies was to a large extent determined by various fertility traditions and rites, which included a form of prostitution known as 'sacred prostitution', and which involved both men and women. It is this form of prostitution that is best attested in ancient documents. Male and female prostitutes are often referred to in literature by the late Greek term *hierodouloi*, i.e. 'sacred slaves', though not all *hierodouloi* need have been prostitutes. In this paper, however, the term will be applied consistently to male and female cultic prostitutes.

According to Babylonian texts, in ancient Mesopotamia ordinary prostitutes as well as cultic prostitutes were very common.³ The proneness to free or cultic sexual relations is illustrated by Herodotus' story⁴ (fifth century BC) that every Babylonian woman, whether of mean or noble birth, once in her lifetime had to sit in the temple of the goddess of fertility waiting for any stranger to throw some coins into her lap – which were given as a gift to the temple – and invite her to sexual intercourse. Having thus discharged her obligation to the goddess, the woman was free to return to her home and continue her normal life.⁵ The existence of male cultic prostitutes in Babylon is extremely probable,⁶ though so far lacking explicit proof.⁷

A practice similar to that in Babylonia existed also in Syria, at Baalbek near the Lebanon,⁸ as well as at Paphos, in western Cyprus.⁹

On Cyprus, at the city of Kition, there was a Semitic temple, in which, according to inscriptional evidence, male prostitution was practised.¹⁰

In Asia Minor, the cult of Cybele and Attis included certain male servants of the temple, known by various names,¹¹ who had castrated themselves, wore women's clothes, and were given to homosexual activities.¹²

In Egypt, cultic prostitution is evidenced by Egyptian as well as Greek sources. The Greek geographer-folklorist Strabo relates a custom at Thebes, Upper Egypt, according to which a beautiful virgin of noble family, consecrated to the god Amon, prostituted herself for a month to whomsoever she chose.¹³ At the same place the wife of the high priest was called the 'chief concubine', while a queen or princess was called 'the wife of the god'.¹⁴ Herodotus had heard the story that to build one

³ See James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 3rd edn.), 595, and D. Winton Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testaments Times* (London: Thames Nelson, 1958), 106-107.

⁴ Herodotus, I.199.

⁵ The story is also reported by Strabo, XVI.1.20.

⁶ Cf. the terms used in the Code of Hammurabi and other documents referring to male devotees, which are similar to those used of female temple prostitutes.

⁷ See George A. Barton, 'Hierodouloi (Semitic and Egyptian)', in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), 673-74.

⁸ Cf. Lucian, *de Syria Dea* 6. See also Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* III. 58.

⁹ Herodotus, I.199; Clemens Alexandrinus, *Protepticus* II.

¹⁰ *Corpus inscriptionum Semiticarum*, Vol. 1: *Inscriptiones Phoeniciae* (Paris, 1887-90), I: 86.

¹¹ E.g. Gallus, Corybantes, Metragyrtes.

¹² Ovid, *Fasti*.

¹³ Strabo, XVII.1.46.

¹⁴ Cf. also Herodotus, I.182.

of the pyramids Cheops had to prostitute his own daughter (who might have been a *hierodoule*), whose clients were expected to offer each a stone for the completion of the project.¹⁵

In Cappadocia, in Asia Minor, in the city of Comana, over 6,000 male and female *hierodouloi* were dedicated to the temple of Ma, while at Venasa, another city of Cappadocia, the number of such sacral prostitutes and sodomites was about 3,000.¹⁶

Cultic prostitution and homosexuality was rife also in Canaan. It occurred in honour of the goddess Ashtarte, from where the custom had infiltrated the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. This led the Hebrews to speak of 'the abomination of the Sidonians' (2 Kings 23:13).

From the above brief survey it may be concluded that in the countries surrounding ancient Israel illicit sexual practices were widespread, and that they occurred in the form of common female prostitution, cultic female prostitution as well as cultic male prostitution or homosexuality.¹⁷

III. THE OLD TESTAMENT ATTITUDE TO HOMOSEXUALITY

There are two fundamental groups of texts in the Old Testament which determine its view of homosexuality. The first group of texts is found in the Genesis account of the creation of man and woman, and the institution of marriage and family (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18-24). In this account we note that men and women are created 'in the image of God', and as human beings are equal with one another. At the same time, they have certain anatomical and physiological differences which make them complementary to one another; they are 'male and female', a distinction that is grounded in their creation. This simple fact engaged Greek philosophers, who tried to give a rational explanation of the male and female factors and their attraction to one another.¹⁸

A natural consequence of this statement is the institution of marriage. We are told that among the great variety of God's creatures, no one was found who could fellowship with Adam, *sc.* Man, i.e. who could complement him as a being of equal order sharing his life on the physical as well as the intellectual and spiritual planes. This led to the

¹⁵ Herodotus, II.126.

¹⁶ Strabo, XII.ii.3, 6.

¹⁷ Cf. Frédérique Apffel Marglin's judgment that 'some form of sexual activity was practised by temple servants of both sexes in most of the cultural areas of Ancient West Asia' ('Hierodouleia', in Eliade [ed.], *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 6, 309).

¹⁸ See e.g. Plato, *Symposium*, especially the speech of Aristophanes, 189c-193e.

creation of the woman, who on being presented to man, was recognised as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Gen. 2:23), i.e. a being that is part of man and without which man is incomplete! The deep insight encapsulated in this brief and simple but realistic story is that we are presented with a double-faceted institution: the institution of marriage and family: 'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Gen. 2:24). The contextual placing of this story at the very beginning of the human race establishes the order and norm for the continuation of humankind, i.e. as one based on marriage and family.

The second group of texts is placed in a very different context. Here the context is that the various human families are understood as having turned away from the knowledge of the Creator and his order, and as having perverted his ordinances. Turning away from him they sink into all kinds of idolatry and lawless acts, which in their essential character are a revolt against God's law and will. In his mercy and for the purpose of fulfilling his salvation-historical plan for humankind, God chooses one family to make it into a people, Israel, through which he will introduce his Messiah-Saviour into the world. At the same time, this people becomes a model for the future, eschatological people of God. It is of this people, to which God reveals himself in a particular way, that God demands a standard of life and conduct that differentiates them from all other nations around them, and is in accord with the intention and order of God's creation and his law.

At the Sinai revelation, therefore, among the things that are laid down for Israel to observe is the prohibition of 'do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; this is abominable' (Hebr. *to 'eva*) (Lev. 18:22). This prohibition occurs in a chapter devoted to sexual prohibitions. The text is preceded by prohibitions referring to sexual relations with relatives of various degrees, and offering children by fire, and is followed by the prohibition against sexual relations with animals. In 20:13, 15 and 16, the same prohibitions are repeated, this time with their relevant punishment: 'If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is abominable. They must be put to death... If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he must be put to death, and you must kill the animal... If a woman approaches an animal to have sexual relations with it, kill both the woman and the animal.' These prohibitions are made in the face and context of widespread practices in the ancient world, of which a specimen was given above: 'You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am

bringing you... Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways' (Lev. 18:3, 24).

The great difference in the ethos of Hebrew religion over against that of the peoples of the ancient Near East is also seen in Yahweh's refusal to accept for his temple gifts coming from the hire of a prostitute or of a 'dog'. The term 'dog', as Deuteronomy 23:18 shows, was a pejorative reference to male prostitutes.¹⁹ Parenthetically, it may be pointed out that the same attitude persists in the New Testament, where according to Revelation 22:15, these 'dogs' will be excluded from the heavenly Jerusalem and from partaking of the tree of life.²⁰

In the environment in which Israel found herself, and in view of tendencies to adopt Canaanite religious customs, the prophetic movement made a strenuous effort to rid Yahweh's worship of idolatrous practices which were contrary to the ethos of the Sinai revelation. The king that introduced high places (Hebr. *bamoth*), sacred stones (Hebr. *matzevoth*), Ashera poles (Hebr. *asherim*) and male prostitutes (Hebr. sing. *qadesh*; pl. *qedeshim*) was Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:23-24). Despite attempts by kings Asa and Jehoshaphat to expel the sodomites or male temple prostitutes (Hebr. *qedeshim*) (1 Kings 15:12; 22:46), these were once again entrenched at the Jerusalem temple, from which they were definitely removed during the reforms of Josiah, who also razed their houses to the ground (2 Kings 23:7).

We may thus conclude that the Hebrew aversion to homosexuality and the acceptance of exclusively heterosexual relations is based on (a) the view of God's creation of humankind as man and woman, in order to complement each other physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually; (b) the view of marriage as a monogamous institution (cf. Gen 2:24, esp. in the Septuagint, which brings out explicitly the idea of the 'two' who in marriage become 'one', quoted in Matt. 19:5), from which, however, the Hebrews often deviated; and (c) the idea of God's blessing involved in the gift of children. The attempt made sometimes to construe this last point as a crude element of primitive societies – that marriage was contracted only for the purpose of offspring – is unjustified. The Old Testament repeatedly speaks of married life as involving joy, delight and fellowship between the partners.²¹

¹⁹ It is interesting to know that the denomination of 'dog' was given also to cultic male prostitutes on Cyprus; see Barton, 'Hierodouloi (Semitic and Egyptian)', 674.

²⁰ See R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), Vol. 2, 178.

²¹ E.g. according to Deuteronomy 24:5 the newly-wed Hebrew was free from war duties for one year in order to 'bring happiness to his wife'; Proverbs 5:18 exhorts men to

IV. HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

The New Testament texts that explicitly speak of homosexuality are few. The reason for this is not that the issue was regarded as unimportant, but that the whole ethos of the gospel message made clear the unacceptable character of such practices for Jesus' followers. The texts are three: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. There are covert allusions to it in 2 Peter 2 and Jude 7-8, but these will not be discussed in this paper.

Of these three passages, only 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 use terms for 'homosexual'. 1 Corinthians 6:9 uses *μαλακός* (*malakos*) and *ἀρσενοκοίτης* (*arsenokoitēs*), while 1 Timothy 1:10 uses *ἀρσενοκοίτης* (*arsenokoitēs*). Romans 1:26-27 uses no such term, but describes the act itself.

The term *malakos* has a host of different meanings. The basic meaning is 'soft'; it then comes to mean 'gentle', 'mild', 'coward', and its bad sense, 'morally weak' and 'effeminate' or 'catamite'.²² In the gospels the term occurs twice of the soft clothing of kings (Matt. 11:8 = Luke 7:25). In its sense of 'effeminate' or 'catamite' it occurs only at 1 Corinthians 6:9. The abstract substantive *μαλακία* (*malakia*) occurs in the New Testament only in the sense of 'sickness' (Matt. 4:43; 9:35; 10:1); in its bad sense of 'effeminacy' or 'sodomy',²³ it does not occur in the New Testament. It is clear that *malakos* is the passive homosexual, while *arsenokoitēs* is the active homosexual.

The term *ἀρσενοκοίτης* (*arsenokoitēs*) consists of *ἀρσεν-* (gen. of Ionic *ἄρσεν* = Attic *ἄρσην*), 'male', and *κοίτη*, 'bed', and signifies 'one who goes to bed with a male'. This term does not occur in the LXX. However, this version translates the relevant words in Leviticus 18:22 (similarly 20:13), 'do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman', with

'rejoice in your young wife', or 'the wife you married when you were young'; Isaiah 62:5 portrays the bridegroom's rejoicing over his bride; in Jeremiah 7:34, 16:9, and 25:10, the disappearance of 'the voices of bride and bridegroom' is the sign of desolation, while their reappearance in 33:11 is the sign of Yahweh's restoration; and finally, the whole of the Song of Songs is an erotic description of heterosexual love.

²² Cf. e.g. Papyrus Hibeh, I.54.11 (245 BC); Vettius Valens, 113.22; Diogenes Laertius, VII.173. Cf. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R.M. Strachan (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), 316-17.

²³ Philo, *Specialibus Legibus* III.39-40; Plutarch, *Gracchus* 4; in Chrysostom's *Punishment Rules* the term occurs of female masturbation. The verb *μαλακίζομαι* (*malakizomai*) occurs in Cyril 1108C (fourth century AD) in the bad sense of 'to be used as a catamite'.

ἄρσενος κοίτην (*arsenos koitēn*), which gives the noun *arsenokoitēs*. The word is a late formation, occurring rarely in Greek literature.²⁴ A large number of similar words formed from the same two elements, or the element *arsen* and some other element, occur sparingly in Greek literature, but they are almost all of them from Christian times.²⁵

The rare occurrence of these terms in Greek literature may give the false impression that the practice was rare. Although homosexuality was probably not as rife in ancient Greece as it is in the modern world, it occurred far more frequently than the use of these terms indicates.

Cultic prostitution was not endemic to Greece, while common prostitution was forbidden to Athenian citizens who, if proved guilty, lost their civic rights and were put to death.²⁶ The relatively rare presence of cultic prostitution in later times is to be attributed to the importation of oriental cults, as with, for example, the cult of Aphrodite in Corinth.²⁷

The typical Greek homosexuality was of a particular brand. The proper name for it is παιδεραστία (*paidēraστία*), or τὰ παιδικά (*ta paidika*),²⁸ and it consisted in erotic relations between an adult and a

24 *Epigrammata adespota* in *Anthologia Palatina* IX, 686; see W.R. Paton (ed.), *The Greek Anthology*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1917), Vol. 3, 380. Another form is *arrenokoitēs*. In the *Sibylline Oracles* II.73 the verb is used.

25 E.g. ἄρσενοκοιτία (*arsenokoitia*), 'sodomy', 'homosexuality', Aristeides, *Apologia* XII.7; XVII.2; Clemens AL, *Paedagogus* II.10 (ἄρρενα... κοίτην); Justin Martyr, *Apology* 25 (ἔρωτας ἄρσένων); ἄρσενοκοιτέω (*arsenokoiteō*) (and ἄρρενοκοιτέω, *arrenokoiteō*), 'to lie with a male', *Sibylline Oracles* II.73; *arsenomiktēs*, 'one who has sexual intercourse with males', Manetho (third century BC), IV.590; ἄρσενομιξία (*arsenomixia*) (and ἄρρενομιξία, *arrenomixia*), 'sexual intercourse with males', Chrysostom, VI.1.553; Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhonism* I.152; III.199; ἄρσενοβότης (*arsenobatēs*) (and ἄρρενοβότης, *arrenobatēs*), 'one who mounts males', Hesychius, *Lexicon* s.v. παιδοπίπας (*paidopipas*); ἄρρενοβασία (*arrenobasia*), 'mounting of males', Theophilus, *Autolycus* III.6; ἄρρενογαμέω (*arrenogameō*), 'to sodomise males', *Scholium* on Aristoteles, *Ethica Nicomacheia* 428.16; ἄρρενομανής (*arrenomanēs*), 'one who has a sexual mania for males', *Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum* VIII (II).43; Hephestio Astrologus I.1 (fourth century AD); ἄρρενομανία (*arrenomania*), 'sexual mania for males', late formation (Δ. Δημητράκου, Μέγα Λεξικόν s.v.); ἄρρενοσίπης (*arrenopipēs*), 'one who watches males with lascivious eyes', Hesychius *Lexicon*, s.v.; Eustathius 827, 30 (twelfth century AD); ἄρρενοφθορία (*arrenophthoria*), 'debauchery of males', *Scholium* on Lucian, *Amores* 36; παιδοφθορία (*paidophthoria*), 'debauchery of boys', Clemens AL, *Paedagogus* II.10; ἀνδροβότης (*androbatēs*), 'one who mounts men', Aristides, *Apology* IX.9; Hesychius *Lexicon*, s.v. παιδοπίπας (*paidopipas*).

26 Aeschines, *Timarchus* 21. Cf. also 13. On the Athenians' tendency to soften the harshness of certain unsavoury words (e.g. πόρνη), see Herodotus, II.134 and Plutarch, *Solon* 15.

27 Pausanias, II.5 and N. Παπαχατζή's Commentary, Παιουσανίου Ἑλλάδος Περιήγησις: Κορινθιακά και Λακωνικά (Athens, 1976), 85. On the Corinthian *hierodouloi*, see also Strabo, VIII.vi.20-21.

28 The terms occur frequently in Plato, *Symposium* 178c; 180b; 183a; 184d-e; 193b-c; 211d; 217b; 222b, τὰ παιδικά (*ta paidika*); 181c; 184c, παιδεραστία (*paidēraστία*); 192b,

boy of, say, between 14 and 20 years old.²⁹ Homosexuality between adults or those of equal status occurred but was frowned upon. Homosexuality between women also occurred and was known as lesbianism, on account of the Lesbian (from the Island of Lesbos) poetess Sappho, who, it was believed, encouraged such relations with her girl pupils.³⁰

Because Greece was divided into city-states and each city-state had its own laws, traditions and customs, views of homosexuality were not uniform. For example, in Elis and Boeotia male homosexuality was accepted, while in Ionia and among the Greeks under Persian rule it was condemned as shameful.³¹ Though the laws were discouraging,³² adult homosexuality was rife at Sparta where, owing to Sparta's militaristic system, men were kept for long periods of time away from their wives and in the company of each other.³³ In Thebes, in the fourth century BC, a somewhat ideal type of homosexuality was encouraged when a general created the so-called 'Sacred Band', a select corps of 300 men coupled as pairs of lover and beloved in order to induce them to fight heroically to the bitter end by thinking primarily of their lover or beloved. It is said that this Sacred Band was invincible until annihilated by Philip of Macedon.³⁴ Homosexuality was practised also at Athens in spite of prohibitive laws,³⁵ as well as in other parts of Greece.³⁶ Xenophon's *Anabasis* gives several examples.³⁷

παιδεραστίας (*paidēraστίας*); and the verb παιδεραστέω (*paidēraστεō*), 'to make love to boys', occurs in 192b as well as Lucian, *Amores* 35; 48; 53.

29 The example is set by Zeus, the supreme divinity of the Greek pantheon, who abducted the handsome youth Ganymedes and made him his cupbearer, Homer, *Iliad* XX.231; *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 202ff.; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* III.xii.2; Aristeides, *Apologia* IX.7; Justin, *Apology* I.21.5; Tatian, 10. It is this name, which in its Latinised form, *Catamitus*, gave the term 'catamite', a passive homosexual. Another such case was the Theban king Laius' abduction of young Chrysippus; see Athenaeus, XIII.79; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* III.v.5.

30 On lesbian relations, see Lucian, *Dialogi Meretricii* V.1-4.

31 Plato, *Symposium* 182b. See also Josephus, *Contra Apionem* II.273.

32 Cf. Xenophon, *Respublica Lacedaemoniorum* II.13-14. The Spartan lawgiver, Lycurgus, regarded relations between males as on a par with 'incest'.

33 K.J. Dover, 'Eros and Nomos', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* (1964), 31ff., has challenged the idea that Sparta was more prone to homosexual practices than other city-states.

34 Plutarch, *Pelopidas* XVIII.1-5.

35 Plato, *Phaedrus* 231e. In *Symposium* 182a, according to one of the speakers the law was somewhat ambiguous.

36 See e.g. Sophocles, *fragment* 153; Thucydides, I.132; Plato, *Symposium* 178e; Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead* XIX.4; Plutarch, *Solon* I.3; *Amatoriae narrationes* II (772); (773); III (773); *Amatorius* 751b; 751c-d; 751d-e; 758b; 760b; 761a-d; 768a; 769b.

37 Xenophon, *Anabasis* II.vi.6, 28; VII.iv.7-10.

The question of pederasty is a taunting one. It is taunting because it is connected with the Greek passion for beauty, found both in the bodily perfection of a youth and especially in his psyche, i.e. his mental, intellectual and spiritual virtues. It is here also easy to see the connection between the purely physical enjoyment in the exploitation of young boys, exemplified by the soldiery in Xenophon's *Anabasis* and the ethereal use of pederastic language in philosophical discussions about Beauty and Truth, such as we find in Plato's *Symposium*,³⁸ a dialogue devoted to the quest of the nature and praise of love. The latter type consisted in setting the highest value upon a handsome, promising boy, and educating him with personal intimacy to be an exceptionally successful and virtuous citizen for his country. In philosophical contexts such language was intended symbolically in an analogous way as the Song of Songs, which though using erotic language, has been retained in the Bible because of its symbolical interpretation. How often the threshold from the philosophical to the physical was crossed also in so-called 'philosophical' contexts – as, indeed, it must have been crossed sometimes – is difficult to gauge. The great philosophers of the fifth and fourth centuries BC – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, for example – for their part condemned physical relations as being below the standards of propriety and as unnatural,³⁹ advocating only 'a marriage of noble minds with no physical manifestation at all',⁴⁰ and if their language is often interpreted to the contrary, this is inspired by modern concerns.

The fact is, however, that homosexuality and lesbianism did occur in ancient Greece, and these practices were common in Roman society

38 The entire dialogue deals with the theme of love, which on the lips of different speakers may have different values; however, on the lips of Socrates the language is purely symbolic.

39 Plato, *Respublica* 403a-c; *Leges* 836c, 838e; Aristotle, *Politica* 1262, a, 32ff. For further evidence of Socrates' and Plato's condemnation of pederasty, see W.K.C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 70-78. Cf. also W. Hamilton, *Plato: The Symposium*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), 12-30. Pederasty was condemned by other ancient authors as well, e.g. Athenaeus, XIII.84 (605d); Plutarch, *Amatorius* 768e. Lucian, *Amores* 36, has a biting sarcasm against this 'superior' kind of love: 'Lions, bears, boars do not love others of their own sort but are ruled by their urge only for the female... Is it any wonder that since animals have been condemned by nature not to receive from the bounty of Providence any of the gifts afforded by intellect, they have with all else also been deprived of desire for males? Lions do not have such a love, because they are not philosophers either. Bears have no such love because they are ignorant of the beauty that comes from friendship. But for men wisdom coupled with knowledge has after frequent experiments chosen what is best, and has formed the opinion that love between males is the most stable of loves.'

40 Hamilton, *Plato: The Symposium*, 13.

as well.⁴¹ Whether this was owing to contact with Greeks, or with the Etruscans, or with other subject peoples, or perhaps to innate Roman tendencies, the fact remains that in Roman imperial times homosexuality, as also incest,⁴² was not uncommon in Rome, and that it was practised by the emperors as well. For example, Emperor Hadrian had the young man Antinoos as his beloved.⁴³ Nero, the emperor to whom Paul appealed for justice had, according to the Roman author Suetonius,⁴⁴ not only relations with many 'freeborn boys', but he even 'castrated the boy Sporus, and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil!' As for the homosexual practices of Tiberius, the emperor under whom Jesus was crucified, they were so perverse as to disgust such Roman authors as Tacitus⁴⁵ and Suetonius.⁴⁶ Tiberius' pederasty had, of course, nothing to do with 'philosophy'!⁴⁷

To conclude this part of the discussion, in the Greco-Roman world homosexuality was a sufficiently frequent phenomenon and it had many faces: homosexuality among adults, female lesbianism, common pederasty, and 'philosophical' pederasty. It is therefore wrong when some modern advocates of homosexuality seek to differentiate between ancient homosexuality, which they suppose to have been either cultic or crude, and modern homosexuality between consenting adult individuals with inner and enduring bonds. The so-called modern type of homosexuality, based on devotion and fidelity to, as well mutual fulfilment of, the partners, as the above survey has made clear, was well known in antiquity. By virtue of his upbringing in Tarsus and his

41 According to the *Sibylline Oracles* III.596-600, homosexual practices occurred among the 'Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Latins, and spacious Hellas... Persians, Galatians and all Asia'.

42 Cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 5.

43 See Pausanias, VIII.9.7; Dio Cassius, LXIX.11.

44 Suetonius, *Nero* 28-29.

45 Tacitus, *Annals* VI.vi.1: '...he resorted once more... in shame at the sins and lusts whose uncontrolled fires had so inflamed him that, in the kingly style, he polluted with his lecheries the children of free-born parents.'

46 Suetonius, *Tiberius*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1951), Vol. 1, 353 (XLIII): 'On retiring to Capri he devised a pleasure for his secret orgies: teams of wantons of both sexes, selected as experts in deviant intercourse and dubbed analists, copulated before him in tripple unions to excite his flagging passions.' Another story goes: 'Once at a sacrifice, attracted by the acolyte's beauty, he lost control of himself and, hardly waiting for the ceremony to end, rushed him off and debauched him and his brother, the flute-player, too; and subsequently, when they complained of the assault, he had their legs broken.'

47 In the words of John Jackson, the editor of *Tacitus*, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1937), Vol. 4, 155: 'It remains impossible that all can be true and incredible that all can be false.'

constant, daily encounters with his contemporaries, Paul would doubtless be acquainted with all these forms of homosexuality as well as with the cultic homosexuality, which had been the bane of his own people in Old Testament times. In his letters to the Romans and to the Corinthians he refers to lesbianism and male homosexuality, as well as to those who play the passive role and those who play the active role in these relations. It now remains to take up a more detailed discussion of the three texts.

V. THE NEW TESTAMENT ATTITUDE TO HOMOSEXUALITY

1. Romans 1:26-27

It has often been supposed that the dark picture which Paul paints of heathenism in these verses is owing to his reaction against these practices which he must have met during his missionary labours at Corinth, and that in this description he makes sweeping, one-sided statements. It may be taken for granted that in the port city of Corinth Paul must have come face to face with the institution of female temple-prostitution. The temple of Aphrodite Pandemos on the Acrocorinth had 1,000 priestesses or *hierodouloi*, i.e. 'sacred slaves', who were the sailors' delight.⁴⁸ Some of them may in fact have been converted to the gospel, and may even have given him some trouble in the order and discipline of church life, either by personal involvement or connections with male members of the church. But if Paul was influenced by such events at all, this must have been only marginal. A careful look at Romans 1 leaves no doubt that Paul is not concerned with describing any local practices, but in setting forth, by way of principle, humanity's revolt against God's will, law, and order. With this in mind, I now turn to a consideration of Romans 1:26-27.

(1) The first expression of importance in these two verses is the phrase 'Because of this' (διὰ τοῦτο). This phrase shows that the lesbianism and male homosexuality, of which Paul is about to speak, are not an unrelated or independent theme of which he just came to think, but an integral and essential part of what he has discussed in 1:18-25 – humanity's fall and alienation from God. It is abundantly clear, too, that in the preceding section of this chapter Paul does not primarily think of the people of his own time, but of the whole history of humankind, beginning at the fall and coming down to his own day. In 1:18-25 Paul describes humankind's rejection of God, their

⁴⁸ Strabo, VIII.vi.20.

substitution of him for idols of wood and stone, their refusal to honour and thank him as Creator, and how this attitude has led to a darkening of their minds, with the consequence that while they considered that they had attained to wisdom and knowledge, they actually had become fools. This leads to the second crucial expression of the text.

(2) The phrase 'God delivered them over' (παρέδωκεν) occurs three times: at 1:24, 'Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to sexual impurity for the dishonouring of their bodies with one another', which is a covert allusion to illicit sexual practices; at 1:26, 'Because of this God gave them over to dishonouring passions', taking up in particular lesbianism and homosexuality; and at 1:28, 'Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind to do what is unlawful', exemplifying with such things as 'hatred, murder... divers inventions of evil things', etc. This shows that lesbianism and homosexuality for Paul are only two – albeit grave – examples of what alienation from God implies. At the same time, they form a kind of retribution which according to God's law is inexorable.

(3) The third expression of interest is that God gave them over to 'dishonouring passions' (πάθη ἀτιμίας). The Greek word for 'passions' is the same as the one used of Jesus' passion. By this Paul means to say that people involved in such acts are essentially passive, under the control of another master, whose slaves they are. This applies both to active and passive homosexuals. The word 'dishonouring' is, of course, evaluative, characterising these passions as dishonourable. It is interesting to note that these practices were regarded as dishonourable not only by Christians, but even by heathens.

(4) The expressions 'even their females...' (θῆλειαι) and 'likewise their males...' (ἄρσενες) rather than 'women' and 'men' respectively, are used in order to draw attention to the sex factor, i.e. the wrong use of their organs.

(5) The expression 'natural use' (φυσικὴν χρῆσιν) was an established way of speaking of 'natural intercourse'. Another expression is 'according to nature' (κατὰ φύσιν). The expression 'contrary to nature' (παρὰ φύσιν),⁴⁹ often used in Stoic philosophy, was applied to that which is against the intention of the Creator and hence not in

⁴⁹ See the informative article, 'φύσις, etc.' by Helmut Köster, in Gerhard Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), Vol. IX, 251-77; on Paul esp. 271-75.

conformity to the nature of things, but contrary to their proper use.⁵⁰ In other words, the term signifies that which is perverse.⁵¹ These expressions do not occur in the Old Testament. But they do occur widely in Jewish authors such as Philo and Josephus,⁵² as well as Greek authors,⁵³ in similar contexts. Thus, commenting on the acts of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:5-29), Philo says: '... also men mounted males without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive (κοινήν φύσιν).'⁵⁴ In another passage, too long to be reproduced here, Philo uses exactly the same expression as Paul does, when he speaks of homosexual relations as being 'contrary to nature' (παρά φύσιν).⁵⁵

(6) The next phrase for comment is 'the males... were inflamed with lust for one another' (ἔξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους). In 1 Corinthians 7:9, writing to unmarried people, Paul advises them to marry, because 'it is better to marry than to burn with passion' (πυρούσθαι). That 'burning with passion', which could also be rendered with 'to be heated', is used of legitimate unfulfilled sexual desire. In Romans 1:27 Paul uses an entirely different word, which implies the breaking out of fire devouring whomsoever is in the way. In other words, this term has a more violent significance, and aptly describes the unnatural character of the action.

(7) In the phrase 'males committed the shameful act with males' (ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι), the expression 'shameful act' represents a Greek word meaning something 'indecent', 'repulsive', 'shocking'.⁵⁶ But already in Leviticus 18:7-18⁵⁷ it was used as a euphemism for the sexual organs (Hebr. *erva*). What is intended by it is the homosexual act itself.⁵⁸

50 On the rabbinic equivalent to κατὰ φύσιν and παρά φύσιν, see H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Vol. 3, 68-74.

51 Cf. Diodorus Siculus, XXXI.xi.1, παρά φύσιν ὁμιλία.

52 See e.g. 2 (Slavonic) *Enoch* 10.4; *Testament of Naphtali* 3.4-5; Josephus, *Contra Apionem* II.273, 275.

53 E.g. Plato, *Leges* 636: ἐννοητέον ὅτι τῇ θηλείᾳ καὶ τῶν ἀρρένων φύσει εἰς κοινωνίαν ἰούση τῆς γεννήσεως ἢ περὶ ταῦτα ἡδονὴ κατὰ φύσιν ἀποδεδόσθαι δοκεῖ, ἀρρένων δὲ πρὸς ἄρρενας ἢ θηλείων πρὸς θηλείας παρά φύσιν καὶ τῶν πρώτων τὸ τὸλμημὶ εἶναι δι' ἀκράτειαν. Cf. also Lucian, *Amores* 19: καὶ μήτε τὸ θῆλυ παρά φύσιν ἀρρενοῦσθαι μήτε τὰρρεν ἀπρεπῶς μαλακίζεσθαι.

54 Philo, *Abrahamo* 135.

55 Philo, *Specialibus legibus* III.vii-ix. For other passages in Paul using 'nature', see e.g. Romans 2:14; 11:21, 24; Galatians 2:15; 4:8.

56 The verb ἀσχημονέω, corresponding to the substantive ἀσχημοσύνη, used here, occurs in e.g. Lucian, *Amores* 28.

57 The word occurs also in Leviticus 20:11, 17, 19-21.

58 By metonymy the Swedish translation has rendered it with *otukt*.

(8) Finally, we have the expression 'and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion'. The word for 'penalty' could also be translated with 'reward'. But what is given as reward is actually a retributory punishment.⁵⁹ This does not exclude the idea of final punishment, but merely indicates that the perpetration of such acts already carries with it its own punishment.

2. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

The interpretation of this text is more straightforward than the Romans text and will be treated more briefly. The context for the verses is chapter 5 and the first part of chapter 6.

According to chapter 5, a member of the church of Corinth was known to have committed incest with the wife of his father. This gave Paul the opportunity to exhort the church not to keep company with people who claimed to be Christian but who lived in sin, and to excommunicate the incestuous person from the church. In the first part of chapter 6, Paul points out the existence of law-suits between members of the church, which led one Christian to draw another Christian to court to obtain justice before unbelievers. As he castigated sexual immorality in chapter 5, so he now castigates greediness in chapter 6, which in Colossians 3:5 is equated with idolatry.

These two themes give him the occasion to administer to the Corinthians the solemn warning of our verses. In verses 9 and 10 he draws up a catalogue of vices whose practitioners will be excluded from the kingdom of God. In this list he does not mention lesbianism, but he mentions both types of male homosexuals: the passive partner (*malakos*, i.e. 'effeminate', or 'catamite') and the active partner (*arsenokoitēs*, i.e. 'one who goes to bed with males'). As if he wanted to underscore solemnly the consequences of such acts by the Jewish custom of judicially establishing a matter by two or three witnesses, he plays the part of a witness twice by averring solemnly once at the beginning and once at the end, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

3. 1 Timothy 1:9-10

This text, too, is simple and will be treated briefly. The point of departure is the law and its function. In the New Testament the term

59 Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 65: 'The implication is that unnatural sexual practice is its own penalty.'

'law' has a number of different usages: the 'ethical law', the 'ritual law', the 'law of the man' (Rom. 7:2), etc. Sometimes by 'law' reference is made to any human law, as it almost certainly is the case in Romans 7:1, while most of the time it refers to the Mosaic law. In our passage 'law' could refer to any legislature, whether pagan or Jewish, as a system of norms and rules which lay down what is lawful and what is unlawful. In Israelite society the Mosaic law functioned in the same way as all other laws in their respective societies. All the vices in this list except one or two like homosexuality, which was not condemned uniformly by all law-systems, came under the sway of both Gentile and Jewish laws. However, in view of the fact that homosexuality was not everywhere criminalised, as well as the detail in verse 7 that the persons here opposed aspired to becoming teachers of the law, it is preferable to understand 'law' primarily of the Mosaic law, though a secondary reference to law in general should not be ruled out.

The author, then, is saying that the law is against those who practise the vices enumerated here, among which homosexuality is included. More interesting than this obvious statement, however, is the final clause of verse 10: 'and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine' (τῆ ὑγιαίνουσα διδασκαλία ἀντίκειται). Here the ordinances of the law are understood as 'sound teaching' – the term 'sound' is typical of the Pastoral letters – and the vices listed are understood as unsound, unhealthy, i.e. sick.

From the Christian point of view, therefore, all these vices, and hence homosexuality too, with which we are here concerned, were spiritually unhealthy practices.

VI. HOMOSEXUALITY TODAY AND THE CHRISTIAN SOLUTION

In the above discussion I have tried to present the evidence from the ancient Near East, Greece and Rome, and to discuss the attitude of the Old Testament and especially of the New Testament to the question of homosexuality. I have refrained from making any evaluative judgments, trying only to give the reasons for the biblical attitude to this practice. In closing, I would like to make a few comments on the attitude of the New Testament to this issue, which should provide guidelines for the church today in its attitude towards persons with homosexual propensities.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ A few years ago Menighetsfakulteten in Oslo published a statement on the biblical teaching on homosexuality, showing simply and clearly the biblical and Christian

(1) The above discussion has hopefully shown that the various kinds of homosexuality practised in the ancient world, i.e. cultic and non-cultic adult homosexuality, pederasty, philosophical or ideal pederasty, and lesbianism, were all known to Paul. The modern claim that the ancients, and hence also Paul, knew only of crude homosexuality, but were unaware that some people were such by nature, i.e. 'genuine homosexuality', is contradicted by Aristotle's statements,⁶¹ as far as male homosexuality is concerned, and by Lucian's statements⁶² as far as lesbianism goes.

(2) Even the most ideal and purest forms of homosexuality were condemned by ancient philosophers and other authors. Mention has already been made in the footnotes of the pagan author Lucian's sarcastic criticism: 'Lions do not have [homosexual] love, because they are not philosophers. Bears have no such love because they are ignorant of the beauty that comes from friendship. But for men wisdom coupled with knowledge has after frequent experiments chosen what is best, and has formed the opinion that love between males is the most stable of loves.'⁶³

(3) Paul's position was that homosexuality and lesbianism, like other vices, were the result of humanity's rejection of God, his will and his law. Paul was aware of the philosophical type of homosexuality with all its emphasis upon deep human fellowship, friendship and devotion to the point of giving one's life for his lover or beloved; but in the light of God's revelation, he saw it as the result of humankind's perversion following their rejection of God. In these and other practices human beings thought they had become wise. For Paul the truth was that they had become foolish and their minds had been darkened.

(4) For Paul, as for the entire early church, homosexuality was contrary to the ethos of the gospel and to what was basic to the Christian faith.

position. In their statement they also give a lot of useful advice particularly in spiritual counselling. Their statement has been published in Swedish in *Svensk Pastoraltidskrift* 45 (1990), 824-28; 46 (1990), 844-49; 47 (1990), 873-76. Editorial note: Interested English-speaking readers might like to consult the following recent works: Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1995); B.G. Webb (ed.), *Theological and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, Explorations 6 (Adelaide: Openbook, 1994).

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* VII.v 3-5 (1148-1149): τοῖς μὲν γὰρ φύσει τοῖς δ' ἐξ ἔθους συμβαίνουσιν.

⁶² Lucian, *Dialogi Meretricii* V.4 (291-292): ἐγενήθη μὲν ὁμοία ταῖς ἄλλαις ὑμῖν, ἡ γνώμη δὲ καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία καὶ τὰλλα πάντα ἀνδρός ἐστί μοι.

⁶³ Lucian, *Amores* 36. This dialogue is often considered to be by another author.

(5) There was no way in which the early church could accept practising homosexuals in its bosom, any more than it could accept liars, idolaters or murderers.

(6) It does not appear that the early church pointed its fingers especially at homosexuals more than at practitioners of other vices. From the biblical point of view all vices were equally reprehensible.

(7) However – and this is of extreme importance – Paul and the early church did not stop at that. Paul and the early church believed that they had an answer to the problem of homosexuals, as indeed to the problem of all others. When the church's Master forgave the adulterous woman, whom the Jews wanted to stone, he said to her: 'Go and sin no more.'⁶⁴ At the heart of the biblical message lies the conviction that God's gracious forgiveness is accompanied by a new creation brought about by the Holy Spirit and an enabling for every sinner to live a new life.

At the very text which we have discussed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, directly after listing for them the various vices, Paul reminds the Corinthians: 'And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' In the church of Corinth, we may assume, there were Christians who once had been homosexuals, prostitutes, perhaps also temple prostitutes. They had now been forgiven, cleansed and had received a new life free from their previous vices. Paul condemned homosexuality, but loved the homosexual! It was for such that Christ had died, not that they might continue in their vice, but that they might be delivered from it and be transformed into new creatures.

Modern medicine and modern psychiatry may have their solutions or partial solutions. The church has the solution of her Master and must remain faithful to it. The church has no right to compromise the Word of God. Such compromises will not only erode its witness and impede its message of salvation, they will also eventually prove a betrayal and a failing of these people in the hour of their need. And they can only lead to greater problems, because they are not God's solution.

⁶⁴ John 8:11. Even though the passage is missing in the oldest manuscripts, there is nothing in this story that could not have been said or done by Jesus. A similar command is given to the lame at Bethesda (John 5:14).