



## Not a Jewish Problem. Observations on the Understanding of Homosexuality in Judaism and Christianity

01.09.2025 | Norbert Reck

**When one asks Christian theologians where the condemnation of homosexuality in the Western world originated, the answer often given is: from the Old Testament, from Judaism. Many believe that the “prohibition of homosexuality” is rooted in the Book of Leviticus. And when they are asked to explain why the Apostle Paul was so outraged that men had “abandoned the natural use of women and were inflamed with lust for one another” (Romans 1:27), many authors consider his Jewish background to be explanation enough: after all, Judaism has supposedly always rejected same-sex relations.**

The internationally renowned New Testament scholar E. P. Sanders, for example, writes: “Paul was against homosexuality—both active and inactive, both male and female. This marks him as Jewish.” For Jews, he claims, homosexuality was “a prime case. They condemned it, lock, stock, and barrel.” This, he says, is clearly stated in Leviticus 18:22 and repeated in later Jewish literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Feminist theologian Bernadette Brooten refers to the “Levitical prohibition of homosexual relations”<sup>[2]</sup>; Stefan Scholz, author of the article “Homosexuality” in *WiBiLex*, the German academic online Bible encyclopedia, writes that “the Tanakh forbids homosexual practices between men (Lev 18:22) and prescribes the death penalty for them (Lev 20:13)”<sup>[3]</sup>; Protestant New Testament scholar Wolfgang Schrage sees Paul here clearly in “Old Testament Jewish tradition,”<sup>[4]</sup> while his Catholic colleague Michael Theobald refers to the “relevant instructions of the Torah” and their “disastrous history of influence.”<sup>[5]</sup>

This list could go on indefinitely; the notion of a Jewish origin for the rejection of same-sex intercourse is still widely held among Christian biblical scholars. Yet it is factually incorrect and—in the name of a more liberal evaluation of homosexuality—nourishes an anti-Judaism that many may not even be aware of, but which is nonetheless harmful. It is high time to let go of this idea.

Anyone who truly wants to understand where the rejection of same-sex sexual acts in our culture comes from, and how it relates to Judaism, must take a closer look and be prepared for some surprises. Above all, one must avoid equating or conflating modern Western concepts with the ideas of other cultures and eras. On the following pages, I would like to share a few observations on this.

### I. Antiquity Knew No “Homosexuality”

First, the term *homosexuality* requires historical contextualization. It is by no means a neutral scientific term describing a straightforward reality; rather, it originated in the biologism of the 19th century. *Homosexuality* was not just a label—it was a concept. It referred to an innate disposition rooted in the body, one that supposedly caused individuals to prefer same-sex partners. “Homosexuals” were thus seen as clearly and immutably different from “heterosexuals”—not only in their behavior, but also in their biology (more on this below). Such a concept was unknown in other times and cultures. Applying it to those cultures only distorts our understanding of them. We end up “seeing” homosexuals where the people of those times and places saw only

people—without essential distinctions.

In antiquity, no one thought of sexually distinguishable groups or different “types” of human beings. Humanity was not divided into heterosexuals and homosexuals. Same-sex acts were something people either engaged in or did not—but not something grounded in a constitutive otherness. The general assumption was that anyone could engage in sex with anyone else, regardless of gender, if they so wished. Sex between people of the same gender was not something that involved only some “others.” This is clear from numerous texts, inscriptions, and visual depictions from Asia Minor, Assyria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The same understanding can be found in ancient Israel.

This insight has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of ancient sexuality. Because ancient cultures lacked the concept of innate sexual orientation, their laws and sanctions concerning same-sex behavior are misunderstood when interpreted through the lens of modern notions of orientation. These laws were not aimed at a biologically predisposed group of “homosexuals,” but rather—at all men. (Sex between women was generally not considered in such legal or moral reflections.)

Had these laws been directed solely at a particularly disposed minority, one might interpret them as attempts to exclude that minority. But they served a very different purpose: the preservation of social hierarchy and its privileges. In most ancient cultures, the key question in sexual relations was who penetrated and who was penetrated. Penetration was understood as a sign of dominance. Women, slaves, prisoners of war, and adolescents were considered socially subordinate and could thus be penetrated by adult men. Penetrative sex between free men of equal status, by contrast, was viewed as offensive and, in some cultures, was ostracized. Such acts were seen as a threat to the prevailing social and gender hierarchies. This is the context in which many laws and sanctions should be understood. It is not without reason that these societies have sometimes been described as “phallic-centered” or *phallocratic* systems.

## II. The Commandments in the Book of Leviticus

The relevant biblical texts concerning same-sex acts differ in an essential way from the regulations found among neighboring peoples. As in all ancient cultures, these texts do not address a supposedly distinct class of differently “oriented” men. The “you” in the biblical commandment, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman” (Leviticus 18:22), is directed at the *ish* (???)—the free Israelite man, the head of an extended household, typically a married patriarch with wife (or wives), children, parents, slaves, and servants. That is, the male leader of a family unit.

In Leviticus chapter 18—which concerns sexual relations within the family<sup>[6]</sup>—this man is told to keep his hands off daughters, sisters, sisters-in-law, or female servants, and, in verse 22, not to “lie with a male,” meaning another male member of the household—specifically, his own sons, slaves, or male servants. (The common translation “do not lie with a man” is misleading in this context, since another man would also be an *ish*, and a household only has one *ish*.)

Leviticus 18 thus does not express a blanket condemnation of same-sex sexual relationships; rather, it aims to protect the minors and dependents in the household. As Old Testament scholar Volker Grunert puts it: “Put positively, this chapter grants all members of the household the right to sexual integrity.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Whereas in other cultures of the region the vulnerable and powerless could be used for sex with impunity thanks to their lower status, Israel developed here a sexual ethic with a distinctly humanizing character. As Grunert notes, this still holds value today: “For those working with victims of intra-family sexual violence, this text is a gem.”

Thus, we are not dealing here with a “prohibition of homosexuality.” The texts make no distinction between “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals”—such categories were unknown. The command applied to everyone.

### III. The Sodom Legend

This is also important for understanding the ancient biblical legend about the destruction of the city of Sodom (Genesis 19). In the story, “the men of Sodom” want to collectively rape two male visitors to the city but are prevented from doing so by God’s intervention. The consequence is then the destruction of the entire city.

Traditional Christian interpreters usually read the story as a tale about a city full of “homosexuals,” whose behavior is condemned in this chapter. However, at the time the text was written, such ideas were completely foreign. Later biblical writings that refer to the Sodom legend, as well as most post-biblical Jewish commentators, thought, not of the misdeeds of a sexual minority, but rather of something quite different: violence against strangers, the wealthy city of Sodom violating the laws of hospitality and refusing to share its prosperity with others. For them, it was a story about greed and selfishness.

Contemporary (especially Jewish) commentators also emphasize that the phrase “the men of Sodom” refers to the city militia<sup>[8]</sup>, which acted against unannounced strangers—apparently using sexual violence as well. This did not require any taste for same-sex intercourse, but rather a strong desire to humiliate, similar to what we see today from conquering armies and guards in prisoner-of-war and refugee camps. The theme of this story is thus the sexualized violence of militias and military personnel, which is both depicted and condemned here. (Such violence was frequently experienced in ancient Israel when troops of neighboring great powers marched through the land as conquerors.) Nobody at the time thought of specific groups predisposed to this; so anyone who today believes they see “homosexuals” in the story is reading into it from a modern perspective something that nobody intended at the time it was written.

Regarding the question: Does the Old Testament know and condemn homosexuality? Catholic Old Testament scholar Thomas Hieke answers a clear no.<sup>[9]</sup> And even among scholars who still uncritically apply the term “homosexuality” to antiquity, some—like the Protestant Old Testament scholar Erhard Gerstenberger—see that the “total condemnation of male homosexuality” is not the aim of the verses in Leviticus, but rather a “later development” during the Hellenistic-Roman period.<sup>[10]</sup> The religious studies scholar Karl Hoheisel also notes a changed attitude for that time: “Greater contact with the Hellenistic world apparently made homosexuality seem like a particular danger.”<sup>[11]</sup>

### IV. Sexuality in the Roman Empire

What did this “contact” with the Hellenistic-Roman world mean? And how did it change the view of same-sex relations? The background to this development is likely found in the expansion of the Roman Empire. From this perspective, one could speak of a militarization of sexuality.

The Roman Empire, which around 63 BCE had established a foothold in the region between Syria and Egypt, was a combination of military and colonial rule. This included the fact that most Roman men—so long as they were still unmarried—served the empire for a time as soldiers. They ensured the enforcement of the *pax Romana*, that is, the securing of control over the conquered lands. They had to be tough and relentless toward the subjugated peoples. Sexualized violence played a significant role in this. The penetration of members of the conquered peoples (especially the men) was a blatant demonstration of who held power and who were the subjects. The Roman cult of heroes also reflected this by idealizing the strong, muscular, and unyielding man.

As subjects of the emperor, Roman soldiers were themselves obedient instruments, but when they committed acts of sexual violence against colonized natives, they could feel superior or at least see themselves as members of a dominant power. (At home, they later continued this with slaves—both men and women—, minors, and wives, who were “by nature” beneath men.) In essence, the gender of the penetrated played only a secondary role in this kind of sex. It was not about eroticism, intimacy, or mutual attraction—this sex was pure power display. But as such, it was socially accepted.

Moreover, the upper class in the city of Rome liked to indulge in Oriental cults, which were considered fashionable and often turned into sex orgies. Attractive slaves and prisoners of war were brought in and abused for this purpose. This had nothing to do with same-sex relations based on mutual respect. (Such relationships did exist, but more in private.)

## V. Paul, Josephus, Philo, and Others

All these expressions of sexuality often aroused disgust among the subjected peoples of the empire—after all, they themselves were often the victims.

Stoic philosophers regarded this kind of sex as “unnatural” and gradually developed a distrust of all forms of human passion. In their view, sex should better serve only procreation and occur only within legally regulated relationships, to avoid being at the mercy of uncontrollable passions.

Jewish authors also began to increasingly problematize erotic desire, which had always been seen as something good in Judaism (cf. the Song of Songs).<sup>[12]</sup> Among them were the historian Flavius Josephus, the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, the Apostle Paul of Tarsus, the authors of the apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon*, and others.<sup>[13]</sup> Interestingly, all of them lived in the Jewish diaspora, outside Israel, where they faced Roman imperial sexuality as a minority to a particularly strong degree. They read the Levitical laws and the Sodom legend in light of their experiences in the Roman Empire and saw them as warnings against the kind of sexuality they encountered in their own time. The original criticism in these texts regarding military violence, the refusal to share one’s wealth, the abuse of dependents, and adultery faded into the background, making room in their interpretations for a general rejection of same-sex sexuality.

They wanted nothing to do with the Roman fusion of power and sex—and in some respects went too far. This is evident in the few statements Paul makes about same-sex intercourse. While he uses the phrasing of Leviticus when he speaks of “lying with males” (1 Cor 6:9) or “males” who desire one another (Rom 1:27), he had something else in mind: not abuse within the family (as in Lev 18) or extramarital sex (as in Lev 20), but the sex of Roman cult orgies and soldiers, all of which he lumps together and condemns indiscriminately: perpetrators and victims, abusers and abused—and even consensual same-sex intercourse. Paul’s stance does not do justice to the biblical intention of “concern for good and God-blessed communal life,”<sup>[14]</sup> as expressed in Leviticus 18 and 20. Rather, he is influenced here by Stoic ideas of “naturalness” and criticism of unrestrained human passions.

Certainly, this was a Jewish position of that time—the other authors mentioned above held similar views to Paul. But one should be careful not to present this as “the” Jewish view that “has always” condemned same-sex intercourse, as some Christian authors do. This risks slipping into “anti-Jewish waters,” as feminist Old Testament scholar Marie-Theres Wacker critically notes.<sup>[15]</sup> Judaism in the 1st century CE was characterized by a particularly broad range of opinions and ways of life: different interpretations of the Torah, different forms of religious practice, and even different attitudes toward the occupying power.

Other Jewish positions can be found when one shifts the view from the minority situation of the

diaspora back to the land of Israel at the same time. Though it had become the Roman province of Judea, it still had an independent, highly vibrant Judaism with the Temple in Jerusalem, many synagogues, and important scholars. Here, some sexual-ethical questions were discussed much more relaxedly. For example, in the 1st/2nd century, the Mishnah tractate *Qiddushin* 14:4 posed the question of whether two unmarried men might sleep under the same blanket—a delicate way of referring to same-sex intercourse. Rabbi Yehuda opposed it and is mentioned by name; however, all other rabbis saw no reason to forbid it. In this sense, the text was later included in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Qiddushin* 82a).

Thus, in rabbinic Judaism, efforts were made over the following centuries to undo an overly fearful view of sexuality.<sup>[16]</sup> The book *Wisdom of Solomon*, which became part of the Christian Old Testament, was not included in the Tanakh, and the writings of Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus did not play a significant role in rabbinic Judaism. Paul, who probably died in the 60s CE, did not live to see this development. For Christianity, his letters—and thus his unbiblical, Stoic rejection of same-sex sex—remained decisive.

## VI. Late Antique and Medieval Judaism

In late antique and medieval Judaism, on the whole, people apparently rested firmly once again in the biblical view of things. Regarding the Sodom narrative, no one thought it had anything to do with same-sex desire. Even in the 13th century, Moses ben Nachman (1194–1270), in his Torah commentary, considered the crucial point of the story to be that “the men of Sodom,” with their threat of violence, wanted to block immigration into the city so they would not have to share their wealth with strangers.

Even where same-sex sexual acts were explicitly the topic (Lev 18:22 and 20:13), no one argued that the commandments applied only to differently inclined people rather than to everyone. For example, a midrash from the 4th century CE interprets Leviticus 18:22 as addressing the power imbalance between adults and minors.<sup>[17]</sup> In the Jerusalem Talmud (compiled between the 5th and 8th centuries CE), discussions mainly revolve around how to interpret the somewhat unclear phrase “as one lies with a woman” (the majority think this refers to penetration). At one point, it is suggested that the commandment in Leviticus 18:22 might help those who are forced against their will to have sex with a man.<sup>[18]</sup> In the 11th century, Rashi (1040–1105), one of the most important commentators on the Tanakh and Talmud, explicitly states that the commandment in Leviticus 20:13 does not refer to young unmarried men.<sup>[19]</sup>

Nowhere in post-biblical Jewish writings do we find the idea that people who desire same-sex intercourse belong to a different kind of human being and are fundamentally different from other people. No one questioned the basic equality of all people created by God.

## VII. Increasingly a Christian Problem

The trail of homophobia, then, does not lead into Judaism. It leads to Christian theology. Mostly following Paul, the above-mentioned passages from the Hebrew Bible were increasingly read as condemnations of sex between men. Yet even then, people did not think of a distinct group of individuals when warning men not to “lie with one another in the manner of Sodom.” For a long time, it was believed that any man was capable of such acts.

However, in the 11th century, the Italian Benedictine monk and later cardinal Peter Damian—an indefatigable fighter for strict church discipline and celibacy—coined the term “sodomy” for sex between men.<sup>[20]</sup> (Sex between women was not a topic for him.) In a deliberate analogy to blasphemy—offense against God—this was his term for an especially grave sin, a mortal sin. The Sodomians, the inhabitants of the city of Sodom, became “Sodomites”: not yet a distinct biological



kind, but a special and irredeemably corrupt type of people connected with the devil.

For the first time in Western history, men who had sex with other men were given a specific label. This label marked them as enemies of God and set them apart as a distinct group. In this view, their sexual behavior made them bearers of the trait “sodomy.” This made them permanently different from other people. Repentance and conversion were no longer enough—Peter Damian could imagine forgiveness of sodomy only “at the other end of the death penalty,” i.e., after the sinner’s execution.

As a consequence, Christian theologians began to read the relevant biblical passages differently. They now saw “Sodomites” at work everywhere. They lost sight of the original addressees of the commandments and divine punishments (overbearing family heads, militias). With the fictitious group of “Sodomites,” a minority was created that was regularly blamed not only for sexually “disorderly” behavior but also for earthquakes, floods, political intrigues, and so on. And from 1215 onward, these Sodomites were persecuted by both ecclesiastical and civil law, facing castration, blinding, execution by burning at the stake, and the like.

As an aside, this labeling of people as Sodomites since the 11th century parallels the fact that Jews in Europe were increasingly marginalized at the same time and, by decree of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, were required to mark themselves with badges on their clothing. Certainly, nothing is to be equated here—the forms of discrimination and persecution were quite different. Yet it was evidently a time when the European Middle Ages developed a stronger need than before to categorize certain groups of people as outsiders—as witches, Jews, Turks (= Muslims), and as Sodomites.

## VIII. From Sodomy to Homosexuality

In the 19th century, the development took a leap forward: “sodomy” became “homosexuality.” The term, coined in 1869, first appearing in a Berlin publication but soon gaining international use, captured the spirit of the age perfectly: it left behind the moral-theological condemnation implicit in “sodomy” and sounded modern, serious, and scientific. Originally, it was indeed introduced with emancipatory intentions.

Was this progress? At least, people wanted to believe so. But the rise of medicine and biology as the leading sciences of the 18th and 19th centuries did not always lead to a restriction to objective scientific knowledge. More often, it fostered a devoted belief that human differences were rooted in biology: in the brain, in hormones, in the blood, in the uterus, in the genes.

People measured the skulls and bone structures of humans in the colonies and classified them as “inferior races.” Women fighting for equality were often diagnosed with hysteria, thought to originate in the uterus. Measuring eye sockets, distances between eyes, and jawlines of prisoners led to the theory of the “born criminal.”<sup>[21]</sup> And naturally, Jews were now also considered a “race,” as the newly coined term antisemitism implied.

Likewise, it was believed that physical causes could be found for same-sex sexual preferences: homosexuality was now regarded as a “natural” trait of a minority. Its bearers were no longer—as in earlier cultures and times—equals among equals, but members of a different species of human. No penance could help anymore. Philosopher Michel Foucault described the difference from earlier thinking as follows: “The sodomite was a sinner, the homosexual was a species.”<sup>[22]</sup>

In other words, humanity was now divided into different sexual species, into human types, thereby definitively abandoning the idea of the creaturely equality of all people. Even in Judaism, which long upheld the biblical conviction of one indivisible humanity created by God, the idea spread that

there were differently predisposed groups, now that this was no longer a Christian-theological but a biological concept.

But was it not progress to no longer judge the matter morally, but from a medical standpoint that clearly stated the affected individuals were not responsible for their disposition? Many thought so, but this was an illusion, because, at that time, there were no new clinical insights at all into same-sex desire. The biological rooting of desire was merely an assertion, a kind of modern belief as religious beliefs increasingly faded.

Those diagnosed with “homosexuality,” who had hoped for liberation from church condemnations through science, soon found themselves exposed to a discourse even more merciless, because it claimed the authority of supposedly scientific facts. The newly identified homosexuals became sought-after study objects of medicine and the young science of psychiatry. They were examined for their backgrounds, family histories, hereditary illnesses, and psychological anomalies, in search of causes for their deviation from the norm. The norm—the soldierly, heterosexual man—remained unquestioned.

And of course, people soon wanted not only to study homosexuality but to “cure” it. Treatment attempts ranged from implanting “heterosexual” gland tissue into “homosexual” individuals, hormone treatments, ovary transplants, castrations, sterilizations, and electroshock therapy, to hypnosis and drug treatments in psychiatric hospitals, and from the 1950s, stereotactic brain surgery. The path of these attempts ranged from voluntary to forced measures, including mass sterilizations and medical experiments in concentration camps under the Nazi regime. In Germany, after 1945, consent to operations was often obtained by promising offenders immunity from prosecution, since many had violated Paragraph 175, which criminalized same-sex acts. Real success was rare, but many patients paid with mental breakdowns or with their lives.<sup>[23]</sup>

In summary: by replacing the Christian-theological judgment of sodomy with the “scientific” idea of homosexuality, medically certified homosexuals were finally segregated as biologically Other from humanity at large: they were no longer sinners but a “special nature” (Michel Foucault). Their “disposition” was their fate. There was no escape from this otherness. Hardly any greater discrimination is conceivable.

Of course, one might ask: But are these people not actually different? After all, they really do differ in their sexual preferences and practices from the vast majority of the population. Cannot one defuse discrimination with a good dose of tolerance for the otherness of these people—and that would be that? That sounds calm and generous. But exclusionary thinking remains exclusionary thinking, even when the otherness of others is regarded benevolently. The others are by definition “not like us,” even if they are “okay.” The discriminatory dichotomy, the contrast between “normals” and “others,” cannot be escaped in this way. It remains a notion of fundamental inequality, a thinking in groups, species, types, and races—a thinking that in the following decades led to increasingly disastrous consequences.

The situation would be different if one thought not of distinguishable *groups*, but of *individual* diversity. After all, all people have their individual peculiarities and a right to have those respected. This was roughly the attitude in early Judaism. But in the 19th century, it was precisely this idea of individual diversity that was lost, when some of those with differing desires were declared a group with biological defects, malformed. Many of those affected no longer experienced their desires as something they wanted, but as something they had to act on because of their physical-psychological constitution. Instead of shame about “immoral” behavior came self-disgust and—out of despair over their supposed “being that way”—frequent suicides.

## IX. The Firm Belief in Otherness

In 1974, about a hundred years after its invention, homosexuality was removed by the American Psychiatric Association from its catalog of mental disorders (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). Since 1991, the World Health Organization has likewise ceased to list homosexuality in its *International Classification of Diseases*. More than a century of “scientific” research into homosexuality was thus declared a fundamental fallacy.

This happened because no reliable proof of medically pathological causes for homosexuality could ever be provided. All theories about gonads, hormonal effects on various body parts, anatomical differences in the brain, or specific chromosomes and their relevance to the emergence of homosexuality were regularly refuted because of scientific shortcomings or interest-driven assumptions, or were called into question by control studies.[\[24\]](#)

What remained, however, was the belief held by large parts of the population at least in Western countries that homosexuality “exists” (if not as a disease, then at least as an unchangeable characteristic of certain people) and that humanity consists of heterosexuals and homosexuals (and perhaps a few bisexuals). This is still widely regarded as the current state of modern science.

And so, fundamental discrimination against people with same-sex desires continues. The “others” are no longer supposed to be scorned, yet their otherness is not questioned. Meanwhile, this “state of science” has long been challenged by numerous sex researchers (more on that in the final section).

I do not want to speculate here about where this persistent adherence to the concept of homosexuality comes from, despite its violent history—whether it gives people more security in an uncertain world, whether belief in the explanatory power of genetics has taken on a quasi-religious character, or whether binary ways of thinking—us/them, normal/other, hetero/homo, white/black, male/female—are so deeply ingrained that many cannot give them up. That would require thorough investigation. Here, my intention has been only to describe the point at which we stand today.

## **X. New Ways of Thinking**

What could be done? One could listen to those—not at all marginal—sexual scientists whose findings have mostly been ignored in the debate so far. For several decades now, they have assumed that the idea of homosexuality as a characteristic of a minority is a mistaken notion that does not correspond to reality.

I will mention only three examples.[\[25\]](#)

In the 1930s and 40s, the American zoologist Alfred Kinsey demonstrated through empirical studies of unprecedented scope that among humans, there are no neatly separated populations of heterosexuals and homosexuals. Homosexual behavior occurs at least occasionally in most people; it cannot be assigned to any special group. The real world cannot be divided into sheep and goats, Kinsey found. “Only the human mind introduces categories and tries to classify facts into specific compartments.”

The British sociologist Mary McIntosh showed in the 1960s that it had never been possible to find sufficiently large groups of exclusively homosexual subjects for studies when asking about their concrete sexual behavior rather than their self-identification. It was equally difficult to find “pure” heterosexual control groups. People always lived differently than the boundary lines of these terms allowed.

Above all, it was psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud who, after years of therapy sessions with numerous clients, could no longer see any point in distinguishing between the one group and the



other. In 1915, he added the following note to the new edition of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*:

*“Psychoanalytic research is most decidedly opposed to any attempt at separating off homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of a special character. By studying sexual excitations other than those that are manifestly displayed, it has found that all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious.”*[\[26\]](#)

In other words: the real feelings and behavior of people do not justify the conclusion that humanity consists of heterosexuals and homosexuals. *All* people desire (among others) members of the same sex; some consciously, some unconsciously. And even in their concrete sexual behavior, they differ at best in tendencies or quantities. Accordingly, it is impossible “to separate homosexuals as a specially constituted group from other people.”

Did Freud want to say that people can freely choose which gender they want to have sexual relationships with? No. Freud knew very well that no one can consciously control their desires. (We cannot even consciously decide whether we prefer beer or wine—or neither.) He only stated that all people are capable of all forms of desire and are therefore originally bisexual. In the course of their development, one gender or the other comes to the fore of desire (while the desire relegated to the background remains present in the unconscious).

How it happens that preference for a certain gender becomes temporarily fixed, Freud could not explain—and no one else has done so to this day. Psychoanalytic consensus holds only that sexual preferences have nothing to do with biological predisposition, but rather with the complex and diverse experiences of an individual's life history. And these can always change. What was once inscribed can be rewritten. In fact, many people go through changes of their sexual preferences over their lifetime (sometimes several times), thereby disproving the idea that their genes determine which gender they are attracted to.

These observations are remarkably consistent with the Torah (and nearly all other human cultures). That the Torah does not know of differently desiring human “types” is, following Freud (and others), no more naive than the modern idea of a homosexual disposition. On the contrary, it is closer to reality.

If these insights from sexual science were taken up, one would start from the fundamental equality of all people—alongside the diversity of all individual inclinations and preferences. The thinking in categories of majority and minority, along with its tendencies toward exclusion, could then be gradually overcome. Politics could promote equal rights for all people instead of enacting special laws for minorities. Sex education could relieve young people of fear about same-sex feelings, because not only minorities, but all people have them. And biblical scholarship could overcome its Orientalism (Edward Said) by ceasing to look for “homosexuality prohibitions” in biblical texts and blaming Judaism for them. It would no longer need to search for homosexuals in the Bible or repeatedly speculate whether David and Jonathan were “homosexual.” It could simply rejoice in how the two men, who were married and had children, lived their love for one another and wept together over their separation (1 Sam 20:41) without shame.

In particular, a glance at the Bible can teach us that humanity was once further along than our supposedly scientific present. But precisely because of this, its case is not hopeless. The task we face today is to understand the diversity of all human behaviors not as belonging to some groups of others, but as a common ground of all people. We must learn to think of diversity and equality as unity, not as opposites.

- [1] E. P. Sanders, *Paul: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 1991, pp. 110–111.
- [2] Bernadette J. Brooten, "Darum lieferte Gott sie entehrenden Leidenschaften aus. Die weibliche Homoerotik bei Paulus", in: Monika Barz u. a. (Hg.), *Hättest du gedacht, daß wir so viele sind? Lesbische Frauen in der Kirche*, Stuttgart 1987, pp. 113–138, here p. 129.
- [3] Stefan Scholz, Art. "Homosexualität", in: *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* ([www.wiblex.de](http://www.wiblex.de)), 3.2.2. Judentum, 2012 (Version 2018).
- [4] Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, EKK VII/1, Neukirchen 1991, p. 430.
- [5] Michael Theobald, "Biblische Weisungen zur Homosexualität? Plädoyer für einen vernünftigen Umgang mit der Schrift", in: *Wort und Antwort* 39 (1998), pp. 92–94, here p. 94.
- [6] I do not address here Leviticus 20:13, which, with almost identical wording, refers to extramarital sex of heads of households. More details in my book *Kein anderes Ufer. Die Erfindung der Homosexualität und ihre Folgen*, Ostfildern 2024, pp. 38–42.
- [7] Volker Grunert, "Lest Ihr ihnen die Leviten! Wen die 'Homo-Texte' der Bibel wirklich im Blick haben", online at: [www.Queer.de](http://www.Queer.de), December 30, 2021.
- [8] See, for example, David Stein (ed.), *The Contemporary Torah, where, referring to other biblical passages* (e.g., Gen 34:20; Judg 20:2), 'anshe ha-ir (the men of the city) is translated as "town council" and 'anshe sedom (the men of Sodom) as "militia of Sodom."
- [9] Thomas Hieke, "Kennt und verurteilt das Alte Testament Homosexualität?" in: Stephan Goertz (ed.), „*Wer bin ich, ihn zu verurteilen?*“ *Homosexualität und katholische Kirche*, Freiburg 2015, pp. 19–52, here p. 19.
- [10] Erhard Gerstenberger, *Das dritte Buch Mose. Levitikus (ATD 6)*, Göttingen 1993, p. 232 and p. 271 and following.
- [11] Karl Hoheisel, Art. "Homosexualität", in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 16 (1994), cols. 289–364, here col. 333.
- [12] See Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley et al. 1997; David Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, New York 1992.
- [13] See, for example, Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.200; idem, *Contra Apionem* 2.199, 2.215, 2.273; Philo of Alexandria, *De Specialibus Legibus* 3.37–42; Paul, Romans 1:22–31, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Letter of Aristeas 151f; *Wisdom of Solomon* 14:23–26; *Sibylline Oracle* 5:166; *Pseudo-Phocylides* 210–217.
- [14] Marie-Theres Wacker, "Altes Testament" trifft "Theologische Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung", in: eadem (ed.), *Wozu ist die Bibel gut? Theologische Anstöße*, Münster 2019, pp. 257–276, here p. 268.
- [15] Wacker, *ibid.*
- [16] Boyarin, *ibid.*, p. 159 and following.
- [17] Midrash *Sifra Kedoshim* 10:11.
- [18] To mention just a few references in the Jerusalem Talmud: Horayot 4a:15; Yevamot 8:6,5; Yevamot 54b:9; Yevamot 83b:10; Keritot 3a:14; Sotah 26b:13; Sanhedrin 9b:7.
- [19] See Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak), *Sifra Kedoshim* 10:8.
- [20] Peter Damian, *Liber Gomorrhianus* (= Epistola 31), in: Kurt Reindl (ed.), *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica 4), vol. 1, München 1983, pp. 284–330. For analysis see Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Chicago/London 1997, pp. 42–44.
- [21] See Dirk Burczyk, "Polizei und Kolonialismus. Eine Einleitung", in: *Bürgerrechte & Polizei/CILIP* 136 (2024), pp. 3–12, here pp. 10 and following.
- [22] Michel Foucault, *Sexualität und Wahrheit, Bd. I: Der Wille zum Wissen*, Frankfurt am Main 1983, p. 58 (English edition: *The History of Sexuality, vol I: An Introduction*, New York 1978).
- [23] A concise overview is given by Heinz-Jürgen Voß, *Biologie & Homosexualität. Theorie und Anwendung im gesellschaftlichen Kontext*, Münster 2013.
- [24] See *ibid.*, pp. 46–70.
- [25] References and further examples in Reck, *Kein anderes Ufer*, chapter V. For a modern view of human sexual desire, based on the current state of sexual science, see *ibid.* chapter VI.
- [26] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, translated by James Strachey, New York 2000, p. 145. German original edition: *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Leipzig/Vienna 1905, 3rd edition 1915).

**Dr Norbert Reck** is a Catholic theologian (Dr theol.) and freelance author. He is a member of the *Jewish-Christian Dialogue Group at the Central Committee of German Catholics* and is particularly interested in overcoming Christian hostility towards Jews and the emancipatory potential of the biblical writings. His most recent publications are '*Der Jude Jesus und die Zukunft des Christentums. Zum Riss zwischen Dogma und Bibel. Ein Lösungsvorschlag*' (Grünewald, 3rd edition, 2021) and '*Kein anderes Ufer. Die Erfindung der Homosexualität und ihre Folgen*' (Grünewald, 2024).

Translation with generous support from Dr. Brian McNeil