

Homosexuality in History

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This article investigates the historical development of homosexuality. It begins with the Ancient Near East, continues with Israel and Judaism, the Greco-Roman world, Christianity and Gnosticism, and finishes with Europe between the Medieval Ages and our time.

The Ancient Near East

Egypt

So far no Egyptian laws have been found dealing with homosexuality.¹ “Unconventional sexual practices are not well documented in ancient Egypt.”² But there are some. Pharaoh Pepi II (dated 24th cent. B.C.) may have had a homosexual relationship with one of his generals. Some scholars suggest “that homosexuality was frowned upon by the Egyptians.”³

“The ideal family relationship in Egypt was for a young man to find himself a good wife and raise a fine family of children. Since inheritance was through the female line, daughters were important. The young husband stood in close relationship with his maternal grandfather.”⁴

One of the texts dealing with homosexuality is a coffin text. The deceased person claims to have had homosexual intercourse with a god. Since the active partner was the one in power, and the passive partner was considered powerless, the deceased person in this text claimed that he has nothing to fear from the god Atum.⁵ To affirm their power, the Egyptians may also have raped defeated male enemies.

“The outstanding account of homosexuality in Egyptian literature is a story about the attempt of the god Seth to violate his younger brother. . . Seth shows a decided interest in the body of Horus. . . . The sexuality of Seth is always irregular; he does not care whether women are married or not. . . . He is given two Syrian goddesses, Anat and Astarte, as wives. He rapes Anat. But in the account in P. Chester Beatty VII, she is dressed like a man. The Egyptian word used is not that for human intercourse . . . but for intercourse between animals.”⁶ The gods set not only “the moral tone for the people” but they are also human constructs used to rationalize one’s own behavior. “The worshippers of Seth would imitate his deeds although these acts might be considered an abomination by those devoted to other gods.”⁷

Pederasty seems to have occurred in Egypt. Homosexual relations may not have been “considered wrong as long as they were based on mutual consent.”⁸ On the other hand, in the *Book of the Dead*, a deceased man who “appears before the judge in the next world” says, “I have not had sexual relations with a boy. I have not defiled myself. . . . I have not been perverted; I have not had sexual relations with a boy.”⁹ Wold states, “Until the end of the first millennium B.C., no prohibition or legal ramifications of same-gender sexual contact can be found. What affected a change in Egyptian attitudes toward homosexuality, then, cannot be shown.”

Mesopotamia

The situation is similar in Mesopotamia. There seems to be no early legislation regarding homosexuality. In the middle of the second millennium B.C., homosexuality is listed among sexual crimes. However, it is discussed whether or not the law refers to homosexual rape only. The penalty is, among other things, castration so that the perpetrator cannot continue his behavior. Another law deals with a false accusation of homosexual behavior. It is implied that this is not homosexual rape, but describes a consensual relationship. In such a case, the accuser should also be castrated.¹⁰

But following the law is not necessarily what one may find in society. In the *šumma alû* prescriptions, a magical text, the following statements are found:

1. If a man has intercourse with the hindquarters of his equal (male), that man will be foremost among his brothers and colleagues.
2. If a man yearns to express his manhood while in prison and thus, like a male cult prostitute, mating with men becomes his desire, he will experience evil.
3. If a man has intercourse with a (male) cult prostitute, care [in the sense of ‘trouble’] will leave him.
4. If a man has intercourse with a (male) courtier for one whole year, the worry that plagued him will vanish.
5. If a man has intercourse with a (male) slave, care will seize him.¹¹

However, these texts may relate to the cult and may not reflect accurately what was happening in everyday life. Springett notes: “Sexual intercourse in the service of a god or goddess was a common practice, which was not regarded as criminal, but a sign of dedication or devotion. Priestesses who followed the custom apparently were highly respected in some manner since even kings dedicated their daughters to the temple. . . . On the other hand, temple prostitutes were not recommended as wives even by Babylonian authors The males attached to the cult (*assinnu*) are sometimes considered to be eunuchs or homosexuals or both.”¹²

The goddess Ishtar/Inanna, as deity of love and war, was an ambiguous figure, sometimes acting like a female and sometimes behaving like a male. She “did not conform to the expected role of a woman as a wife and mother, but on many occasions acted as a man. . . . Accordingly, Ištar was worshiped as a lovely maiden but also as a bearded warrior.”¹³ A Sumerian hymn claims that Ishtar had the power to turn men into women and women into men.¹⁴ No wonder devotees, the *assinnus*, the *kurgarrûs*, and the *kulu’us* or *galas* exhibited the same pattern. “It seems that all three groups of cultic functionaries were born as men (or hermaphrodites), but . . . their appearance was either totally feminine, or they had both male and female characteristics.”¹⁵ “. . . it seems possible that the devotees sometimes participated in same-sex relations. . . . Their gender is definitely ambiguous: even the corresponding cuneiform sign for them (UR.SAL) means a ‘man-woman’ or literally ‘dog-woman’ (‘dog’ represents masculinity in negative sense).”¹⁶ As to how were they perceived by society, Teppo answers:

As members of a third gender, *assinnus*, *kurgarrûs*, and *kulu’us* break one of the most important boundaries of Mesopotamian society—the boundary between men and women. They are anomalies: gender-ambivalent devotees of the ambivalent goddess Ištar, who herself is the supreme transgressor of boundaries. This makes the devotees sacred, powerful, and dangerous but at the same time impure, marginal, and feared.¹⁷

This paucity of information may indicate that homosexuality was not very widespread in Mesopotamia.¹⁸

Hittites

“None of the Hittite laws proscribes homosexuality, except for the case of incest: ‘If a man violates his son, it is a capital punishment.’”¹⁹ Since we know so little about homosexuality among the Hittites, we cannot tell whether it was accepted or it was uncommon. However, we know about bestiality. “Sexual intercourse with sheep and cows was forbidden. . . . But intercourse with horses or mules incurred no punishment.”²⁰

Canaanites

Texts describing Canaanite homosexuality have not survived. Based on Leviticus 18:24 and its immediate context, it can be assumed that homosexual acts were practiced in Canaan. “At this point, however, we must say that homosexuality as a common practice in Canaan cannot be identified in the available texts, nor is it represented in the art we have. Fertility, promiscuity, bestiality, incest, yes—but not homosexuality.”²¹

Ancient Israel and Judaism

Israel

The Old Testament has not only clear prohibitions against homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), but it also relates instances in which homosexuality occurred. However, such occurrences are treated negatively. Homosexuality is an abomination and will be punished.

Judaism

The OT Apocrypha such as the *Wisdom of Solomon* discuss the sin of Sodom repeatedly and condemn it, however, under the category of inhospitality. Yet Wisdom 14:26 speaks about the confusion of sex which may point to homosexuality.

The Pseudepigrapha are also opposed to homosexuality, most clearly *2 Enoch*. “*Second Enoch* 34:1-3 refers broadly to adult sodomy, whereas 10:4-5 primarily refers to pederasty. The speaker in *2 Enoch* adds his negative evaluation to both.”²² According to *2 Enoch*, the practice of homosexuality occurred even before the Flood. The authors of the Pseudepigrapha that mention sodomy considered it not only “as sin in a religious sense but also as lawless in a civil or criminal sense. . . these Jews held Gentiles accountable for tolerating sodomy in their own law codes²³”

Rabbinic Judaism was not different. “The Mishnah viewed homosexuality as demanding a more severe form of death than murder!” *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 8:7 “places homosexuality with the clearly universal crimes of murder and adultery and not with the ‘ritualistic’ offenses. The Mishnah views homosexuality as an offense more grave than murder, yet views it as not so grave as bestiality, the profanation of the Sabbath, or idolatry with regard to its spiritual consequence. . . . The Mishnah also prohibits an unmarried man from teaching children, and two unmarried men from sleeping under the same cloak (*Qiddushin* 4.13f.).”

“The Talmud in later versions regards lesbianism as disqualifying a woman from marriage to a high priest (*Bab. Shabbat* 65a) and does not admit to court the witness of one who consents in the act of pederasty (*Bab. Yevamot* 25a).”²⁴

Philo of Alexandria and Josephus condemned homosexuality. They believed “that law should prohibit homosexual activity such laws should exist among all the nations. It is not possible to limit their convictions to pederasty, since they deal with androgynous people and the events of Sodom. Both writers uphold Mosaic legislation as superior law to the pagan codes.”²⁵

Greco-Roman World

Greece

“Greek society probably was the ancient society in which homosexuality was most prevalent No doubt homosexuality in Greece was due in large measure to the narcissistic character of Greek life and the influence of religion. The gods practiced it (e.g., Zeus with Ganymede, Heracles with Iolaus or Hylas, and Apollo with Hyacinth), so people were justified to pursue it.”²⁶

Some scholars believe homosexuality could have been introduced to Greek society around 1400 B.C. During the seventh/sixth century B.C., a lady called Sappho from the island of Lesbos began writing about her feelings for other girls. Lesbianism is derived from her place of origin. Whether she had sexual intercourse with other females or just had feelings for them is not completely clear. In any case, there was no cultic association.

“The most common form of homosexuality among Greek males was pederasty. This term refers to a plan of education for boys in which they were placed by their fathers under the care of another man to be trained. As a feature of the system the boy, called the *eromenos*, could be expected at times to provide his mentor, the *erastes*, with homosexual favors.”²⁷ It was considered an honorable institution. The boys, typically up to the

age of puberty, were not expected to enjoy the sexual relationship but endure it. Otherwise they were considered perverts. After the boys had grown up they were expected no longer to play the passive role in a sexual relationship.²⁸

The Timarchus case in the court of Athens reveals that this city administrator was involved in pederasty, homosexuality, prostitution, and bestiality.²⁹ He was sentenced to death.³⁰

De Young holds: “Greek homosexuality was diverse: pederasty, adult male and female, and male prostitution. It was characterized by mutuality and permanency, as well as rape and infidelity Homosexuality became institutionalized in the military, in education, in the home, and in laws. Many of the great philosophers, artists, poets, and leaders—including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle . . .—were homosexuals or pederasts.”³¹ Although Plato supported pederasty, he later changed his position somewhat.³² Laws are necessary “to regulate sexual activities among heterosexuals and homosexuals.”³³ Plato also shares the androgynous myth³⁴ about “the emergence of sexual differentiation.”³⁵ Aeschines sought to protect boys and even slaves from sexual harassment and assault.

Rome

“Roman society seems to have inherited widespread homosexuality from Greece in the second century B.C. It occurred in all forms (pederasty, male prostitution, mercenary catamites, adult mutuality, and lesbianism). The Romans fashioned several law codes over several centuries to legislate homosexuality in various ways.”³⁶ They are: (1) *Lex Scantia* (around 226 B.C.); (2) *Lex Julia de adulteriis coecendi* (around 17 B.C.); (3) *First novella* (A.D. 538); (4) *Second novella* (A.D. 544). It is remarkable that the first laws against homosexuality were drafted before the Christian church was founded.

Christianity and Gnosticism

Orthodox Christianity

The New Testament followed the OT in condemning homosexual activity. This was supported by the church fathers such as Augustine and Chrysostom. “*Apostolic Constitutions* (7.2) says that sodomy is unacceptable Christian behavior³⁷” And “[b]y the fourth century church councils began enacting rules and canons on the subject. Soon the church’s position became that of the Roman government, and Rome began to enforce legislation already in place.”³⁸

Gnostic Groups

While orthodox Christianity upheld the position of the OT and NT, Gnostic groups took a different approach. They reinterpreted the biblical texts. Church father Epiphanius describes a group called Barbelites. They engaged “in ritualistic opposite-sex copulation [going] to special and sometimes extreme measure, so as to prevent insemination and procreation³⁹” Those involved were still considered to be virgins and are in the image of God and reflect the holiness of God. But “these opposite-sex acts are only for the neophytes; the more advanced adherents of the sect⁴⁰ are involved in homosexuality. “. . . for these Gnostics, the same-sex act, being such a horrid distortion of the process of gendering, the antidote to the proscribed opposite-sex act if you will, enabled them to free themselves from the shackles of gender.”⁴¹ They did not want to become subject to the horrible entity called Nature.

For the Naassenes, heterosexual intercourse is “an utterly wicked and defiling thing. . . . Paul claimed that sexual acts between females were ‘unnatural’ (*para physin*); the Naassenes rejoined that since gender is ‘natural,’ it is a blessing to act ‘unnaturally.’”⁴² “. . . the pure human according to these gnostics was ‘neither male nor female, but a new creature, a new Human.’ Indeed this is a recurrent motif in most, if not all, Gnostic

writings: the original perfect human, or *anthrōpos*, is neither gendered nor sexed, and gender is the creation of an evil, inferior and overly masculine god whose purpose is to delude humankind lest they recognize their heavenly origin.”⁴³

Europe between the Medieval Ages and Our Time

The Christian Church understood homosexual activity as a grave sin. According to Gregory of Nyssa, punishment varied between nine years of penance and excommunication. The most comprehensive treatment of the issue is found in the work of Cummean. He also focused on lesbianism. In the Medieval Ages, homosexuality is once again associated with heresy. Thomas Aquinas evaluated homosexuality and stated that the sexual organs are not be used in such a way as to exclude procreation. Homosexuality is almost as bad as bestiality.⁴⁴ The position of the church influenced the government. Oftentimes, homosexuals were persecuted and even executed.

While the French civil code did not mention homosexuality, the British laws as well as the German and Austrian laws threatened homosexual behavior with punishment even as late as the end of the 19th century and in some cases even the midst of the 20th century.⁴⁵ Since then, homosexual partnerships have been accepted in many countries, often treated like heterosexual marriages. Liberalism and secularism along with homosexual lobbying has contributed to a complete change of approach in many societies.

In the meantime, so-called hate speech laws curtail the freedom of speech in a number of countries, and non-discrimination laws attempt to force even churches that are opposed to a homosexual lifestyle to hire practicing homosexuals, thereby militating against the freedom of conscience. While it is deplorable that homosexuals have been persecuted and killed—certainly against the implications of the gospel—discrimination of those who do not agree with a homosexual agenda is not a better approach. Humans must learn to live with differences of opinions and yet respect each other.

Conclusion

This brief survey has shown that various forms of homosexual behavior were known and present in most, if not all, cultures of the Ancient Near East. Such practices were not always exploitive and violent. Nevertheless, many cultures were ambivalent regarding forms of homosexual behavior. While it may have been tolerated under certain circumstances, it was not the norm and was not necessarily accepted by the population that upheld the value of heterosexual marriage and family relationships in which children played an important role.

Following the unique biblical position, Jewish and Christian societies rejected any type of homosexual activity for centuries. Only recently, some churches, following the new approach of various cultures and secular governments, have made provisions for a homosexual life style while others respect homosexual persons without advocating or condoning their lifestyle.

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¹Cf. Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books Publishing Company, 1998), 56.

²Ronald M. Springett, *Homosexuality in History and the Scriptures* (Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference, 1988), 34.

³Wold, 56

⁴Springett, 34.

⁵Wold, 56.

⁶Springett, 35, 37.

- ⁷Springett, 39.
- ⁸Wold, 59.
- ⁹Wold, 57-58.
- ¹⁰See Wold, 47-58; Springett, 40-41.
- ¹¹Wold, 48.
- ¹²Springett, 41.
- ¹³Saana Teppo, "Sacred Marriage and the Devotees of Ištar," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, ed. Marti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 76.
- ¹⁴See Teppo, 85.
- ¹⁵See Teppo, 77.
- ¹⁶Teppo, 81. In her article Kathleen McCaffrey, "Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert Whiting (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379-391, she argues that these males who took on a female role should be considered a third gender in their society.
- ¹⁷Teppo, 91.
- ¹⁸See Wold, 51.
- ¹⁹Wold, 54.
- ²⁰Martha Tobi Roth, Harry A. Hoffner, and Piotr Michalowski, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 236.
- ²¹Wold, 60.
- ²²James B. De Young, *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in the Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), 87.
- ²³De Young, 244.
- ²⁴De Young, 246.
- ²⁵De Young, 248.
- ²⁶De Young, 252.
- ²⁷Springett, 87.
- ²⁸Cf. Springett, 87-88.
- ²⁹See De Young, 235-237.
- ³⁰See De Young, 235-237, for a detailed description.
- ³¹De Young, 252-253.
- ³²For details see David L. Balch (ed.), *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 44-45.
- ³³De Young, 253-254.
- ³⁴Springett, 97-98: "In this myth Plato explains that primal man was dual. He had four hands, four feet, two faces and two privy parts, that is, like two people back to back—the faces opposite directions. Some of these dual, primal creatures were male in both parts, others were female in both parts and yet others (a third sex) part male and part female. These primal creatures were so strong that they became insolent, attacking the gods. Because of their continued insolence, Zeus divided these dual four-legged creatures into two-legged creatures. A dual male became two males, a dual female two females and the male-female (androgynous) became a male and a female. On this basis he accounts for the differing sexual desires apparent in society, for each creature searches out its own or opposite kind, according to its original orientation. When dual parts encounter each other they fall in love. By the creation of this myth Plato attempts to explain the attraction some men and women have for persons of the same sex."
- ³⁵Balch, 46.
- ³⁶Cf. De Young, 257.
- ³⁷De Young, 251.
- ³⁸De Young, 252.
- ³⁹Jonathan Cahana, "Gnostically Queer: Gender Trouble in Gnosticism," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41/1 (2011): 26.
- ⁴⁰Cahana, 27.
- ⁴¹Cahana, 26-27.
- ⁴²Cahana, 28, 29.
- ⁴³Cahana, 30.

⁴⁴Cf. S. Bailey, "Homosexuality," in *Die Religion in Gescyhichte und Gegenwart*, third edition, ed. Kurt Galling (Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1959), 443.

⁴⁵Bailey, 443.

1/14

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