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Leviticus 18,22 and 20,13

Sexual offences in the Mosaic Law

Lev 18,22 and 20,13 are the most direct – and for that reason most quoted – passages about homosexuality in the Old Testament: Those should be punished by death who 'lie with a male as with a woman'. Both times, it is called an 'abomination'.

At first glance, there's not much space for interpretation, the statement sounds unambiguous. However, a couple of thoughts can be added here. First of all, which kind of homosexuality is the Old Testament familiar with? Biblical scriptures only know of two forms: homosexual cult prostitution and same-sex practices as a special form of erotic pleasures between heterosexual men.

Naturally, male cult prostitution was prohibited in Israel at that time, as well as prostitution in general (Deut 23,18f). Those were pagan customs that were officially introduced in Israel during the reign of King Rehoboam (1 Kings 14,24). Only centuries later, the so-called 'hierodules' were eliminated by Josiah (2 Kings 23,7). The existence of male cult prostitutes (so-called 'dogs' cf. Deut 23,17f) who were visited by men cannot be denied, whereas the claim that homosexual prostitution didn't exist and the hierodules were merely 'servants' in pagan temples can surely be rejected. The ordinary temple staff had already existed before Rehoboam under Salomon and it would therefore be hard to understand why the books of Kings should single out and condemn the hierodules in particular, next to the overall idolatry.

Commentaries don't agree if all male prostitution really was of cultic nature. It is also discussed whether the hierodules in the books of Kings were women or men. Most, also conservative, exegetes, though, assume that they were men.

Cult prostitution practiced by either women or men is supposed to have served in the context of fertility rituals even though this seems paradoxical in connection with homosexual practices. Homosexual acts that occurred in the context of idolatrous rites must have aggravated the existing rejection of these practices since it represents one of the basics of biblical symbolism that often describes polytheism as adultery and prostitution of the people of God.

Nowhere does the Bible take into consideration a homosexual 'subculture' or long-term homosexual relationships as we know them from our cultural sphere. Indeed, there is a certain homophile undertone to David's and Jonathan's friendship – the words that give account of Jonathan's awakening love for David for instance just sound like a paraphrase for 'to fall in love' (cf. 1Sam 18,1). A real homosexual relationship between the two seems unlikely, however, the more so as David's sex life is presented quite blatantly in other passages.

Up to here we have to summarize that the strident tone in the biblical ban of homosexual activities is clearly aimed at idolatrous sexual practices and against a certain 'fun and amusement' sexuality of heterosexuals, who might have even been married 'normally' at the same time. We cannot be sure, though, whether the mosaic prohibitions had homosexual love partnerships in mind at all.

Secondly, we have to ask ourselves why only male homosexuality is mentioned and condemned in the books of Moses when other interdictions in the same passage such as intercourse with animals, but also the ban of adultery and premarital sex are explicitly directed at men *and* women. This omission does certainly not allow for us to conclude that male homosexual activities were forbidden, whereas female were

permitted. If it was already the homosexual predisposition these passages wanted to judge, it would be startling that this trait should have only existed in men when the socially secluded position of the women in the Ancient Orient, where women frequently stayed among themselves, could have definitely fostered homoerotic feelings.

Obviously, it must have been a reaction to the ritual-culturally dictated ways of sexual activities with the Canaanites, who, for example, provided men as well as women for sexual intercourse with animals, most likely in order to unite with the animal incarnation of a female or male god. Homosexual contacts, on the other hand – either as cultic practices or as sexual 'extra pleasure' –, must have well been reserved for men at these times of the patriarchic societies, maybe because the woman was considered the sexual property of the man and, thus, didn't have the right to any sexual 'duplication'.

In any case, here as well the impression is created that at the time of Mosaic Law the Bible only knew and judged homosexuality as a cultic or ritual phenomenon, as a phenomenon that didn't take into consideration a homosexual disposition or love relationships.

There is another thing that we shouldn't forget when interpreting the above-mentioned verses from Leviticus. People like to point out that here homosexuality is called 'an abomination' and that it is most unlikely that God should have changed his 'taste' – which is a thought that actually clashes with our idea of God. The fact that the various terms used for 'abomination' and similar expressions mentioned in the so-called Laws of Sanctity don't represent something eternally morally reprehensible poses a problem here. In parts, these expressions simply denote the state of cultic impurity (as does the highly natural period of the woman's menstrual cycle). This differentiation between purity and impurity especially served the Israelites as a means of separating themselves from the Canaanite customs and traditions.

The books of law mention a number of things that God finds 'disgusting', that are labeled 'atrocious', 'abhorrent' or 'disgraceful' even though they aren't seen as a problem by the majority of Christians today, i.e. eating pork or hare (cf. Dtn 14,7ff) or wearing men's clothes by a woman (Dtn 22,5). Only a few verses after the interdiction of homosexuality, having sexual intercourse with a woman during her period is forbidden under pain of death (Lev 18,19 and 20,18). This commandment also falls into the category of abominations. Modern Christian marriage guide books might not exactly recommend this period for natural birth control, but they will definitely not condemn it.

People also like to point out that in some interdictions of abominations health aspects play a role, for instance protection against infections transmitted through intercourse during menstruation or nutritional aspects when it comes to pork. For these reasons the bans of abominations would still be objectively accurate and appropriate today. But since all of the discussed laws are justified by 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (Lev 19,2) and all of the so-called abominations are largely equated with capital crimes, I don't find it plausible that they should only have health purpose. In my opinion, to reduce an 'abomination' to a way of controlling the amount of cholesterol makes a mockery of God's holiness.

Even something that is considered a great victory of Christian values in pastoral counseling, that is taking back one's former wife and remarrying her after a divorce, is 'an abomination before the Lord' (Deut 24,3f). Later in this book, we will concentrate again on the change that has taken place in the evaluation of marriage, divorce and remarriage expressed in this passage.

Valeria Hinck **LOVE _wIN_s THE DEBATE**
Biblical Pleas Against The Discrimination Of Homosexual People

Sexuality is a gift founded by God himself, given to mankind and even included in God's very first mandate that we read about in the Bible: 'Be fruitful and multiply!' (Gen 1,28). But sexual intercourse between man and woman can still be an abomination if it takes place between the wrong people (every ban of fornication in the Law of Sanctity in Leviticus falls under the expression 'all of these abominations, cf. Lev 18,27f). So knowing the historical background, who may determine with absolute certainty that the statements on homosexual practices refer to homosexuality per se and not only to the kind of homosexual relationship common at that time? With respect to the heavily disputed issue of homosexuality, the members of Christ's Church should ask themselves the following moral question: If it is only the specific way people used to have sex with each other back then that God considered an 'abomination', but not homosexual love in itself, how much do people wrongly announcing to others that God loathes them because they lead a life that is in accordance with their identity?

It is remarkable that present day Christians don't even feel bound to those 'remains' of Mosaic law reaffirmed in the New Testament (Acts 15,28: 'for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you these requirements...'). Believers think long and hard about sexual immoralities, whereas they hardly consider the question how to avoid blood and strangled food (nothing that leaves our butcher's, meets Jewish slaughter rules). In my opinion, the latter is rightfully classified culturally out-dated, but how do we justify where to draw the line between the binding and the invalid rules?

As we see, arguments based on the term 'abomination' can be highly problematic. What the Mosaic law refers to as an abomination is in no way necessarily something that God must abhor and proscribe for all times. People who categorically condemn homosexuality on the basis of these verses at least have to live with being accused of certain selectivity.

There is one last thing that I want to add to the 'Catalogue of atrocities' in Leviticus 18 and 20. Here, homosexual practices are mentioned along with many sins that God dislikes: '[...] for the people of the land, who were before you [before the Israelites], did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean [Lev.18. 27...]' God had already promised to Abraham that his descendants should inherit the land as soon as the iniquity of the Canaanites was complete (cf. Gen 15,16). Ironically, it is the patriarchs themselves, to whom these promises were made, who committed exactly these kinds of sins: Abraham married the daughter of his father (Lev 18,11) and Jacob a woman and her sister at the same time (Lev 18,18), Ruben slept with the wife of his father (Lev 18,8) and Judah seemingly with a prostitute (Deut 23,18), in fact it was his daughter-in-law (Lev 18,15). All of these examples were judged upon by God: 'For they did all these things, and therefore I detested them.' Though the patriarchs lived a long time before the Mosaic law was announced to Israel, this still doesn't release them from liability. Firstly, the Canaanites precisely would have had every right to claim this argument, and secondly, God had already adjudicated upon the 'sins of the Amorites' at the time of Abraham in connection with his promise to him.

So we obviously have to consider that God doesn't merely judge the bare facts, but also takes into account mankind's basic attitude towards Him. This clearly doesn't mean that God approved of the actions of the patriarchs, but they didn't prevent Him from letting them lead a life together with Him out of sheer mercy while the Canaanites had to face the divine tribunal. Maybe for these reasons, people should also be more cautious with the argument of abomination when they harshly judge and condemn one specific group, in this case homosexuals.

