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HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE?

Some Thoughts on Lev 17 and 20; Gen. 19 and the David-Jonathan Narrative

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Sexuality plays a major part in every anthropological reflection. Already in the great myths of Eastern and Western antiquity, sexuality is more than simply a means of providing offspring. Humankind differs from animals through the experience of sexuality for its own sake and thus occupies a special position within the works of creation. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu becomes a human person because he made love to a prostitute for a week. As a result the wild animals, amongst which he had lived before, turn away from him. According to the Epic of Gilgamesh, sexuality that is not mainly concerned with procreation appears to be specific to humans.

In contrast to Greek myths that include the description of same-sex relations (often between gods and humans) when speaking of sexuality, Ancient Near Eastern texts are much more reserved in this respect. Jewish and Christian tradition has radicalized this reserved tendency for centuries by regarding homosexual relationships as »sin,« citing texts such as Genesis 19 and Leviticus 18 for proof. For about the last two decades homosexuality has been one of the big issues facing society. In many European countries today homosexual relations are protected by the state. This rapid change of Western society is, however, not met with unanimous acceptance. The issue is an especially sensitive topic within Churches. Most of them advocate the admission of homosexual members but they often mean quite different things by it. Insurmountable trenches emerge and the discussion within churches and individual parishes is often quite heated. In these discussions the Bible plays an important and often decisive role.

However, the anachronism of such a use of the Bible is rarely reflected upon. Let us recall that neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament know of expressions that could be translated with »homosexuality« or »homosexual«. In the Bible - as in the other cultures of the Ancient Near East - sexuality or sexual orientation is never an isolated phenomenon. Rather, sexuality cannot be separated from other roles and functions of the individual within society. To classify human persons according to their sexual orientation is a modern invention. The first use of the term »homosexuality« seems to have occurred in 1869 by an Austrian doctor, and was then used by doctors, psychiatrists, and jurists

to describe a sexual orientation that deviates from the norm.¹ Unlike previous centuries, sexuality, beginning in the industrial age, becomes a decisive factor to qualify an individual in a society that is composed mainly of heterosexual persons with homosexual ones forming a minority. The question, however, remains as to what is meant by »homosexual«. As David Halperin reminds us we have to exercise caution when using the term:

»Does the 'paederast,' the classical Greek adult, married male who periodically enjoys sexually penetrating a male adolescent share the same sexuality with the 'berdache,' the Native American (Indian) adult male who from childhood has taken on many aspects of a woman and is regularly penetrated by the adult male to whom he has been married in a public and socially sanctioned ceremony? Does the latter share the same sexuality with the New Guinea tribesman and warrior who from the ages of eight to fifteen has been orally inseminated on a daily basis by older youths and who, after years of orally inseminating his juniors, will be married to an adult woman and have children of his own? Does any of these three persons share the same sexuality with the modern homosexual?«²

This quotation illustrates that the use of the label »homosexual« or »homosexuality« in commentaries on Genesis 19, Leviticus 18, and Leviticus 20 is often inconsiderate imprecise and does not do justice to a proper historical and anthropological evaluation of these texts. If one takes seriously the fact that categorizing humanity in a heterosexual majority and homosexual minority is an invention of the 19th century, one has to concede that the use of the term for interpreting biblical texts is inappropriate. In the following I would like to revisit the well-known texts from the Hebrew Bible that play such an important role in Christian and Jewish debates about homosexuality.

1. THE PROHIBITION OF SAME-SEX RELATIONS IN TWO TEXTS IN LEVITICUS

Within the context of the Bible only two texts in the Book of Leviticus refer explicitly to sexual relations between two men (sexual relations between women are not addressed). One could also probably add a prohibition from Deuteronomy, although the meaning of this text is not entirely clear: The text of Deuteronomy 23 begins with a list of several categories of people who are to be excluded from the community of the people of Yhwh: Bastards, Moabites, Edomites, unclean persons. Following this, we arrive at Deut 23:18-19, which seems to allude to the institution of cultic prostitution attested in Israel as well as in the Ancient Near East:

¹ See TAMAGNE 1998.

² HALPERIN 1990, 46.

(18) None of the daughters of Israel shall be a consecrated woman (*qedesha*); none of the sons of Israel shall be a consecrated man (*qadesh*). (19) Do not bring the fee of a prostitute or the recompense for a dog into the house of Yhwh your God in payment for any vow, for both of them are repugnant to Yhwh your God³.

On the one hand, the verses show that it is likely that Temple prostitution was practiced in Israel. On the other hand it is clear that prostitutes belonged to both sexes.⁴ The noun »consecrated man/woman« seems to describe the persons who practiced cultic prostitution. In addition, the male prostitutes are labelled with the derogatory term »dog«. The prohibition of Deuteronomy does not specifically refer to homosexual relations but to cultic prostitution in general and the worship of a female deity connected to it. The practice is described as being an abomination תועבה, a noun often used in the laws of Deuteronomy as well as in Lev 18. The Hebrew word describes something that it outside the norm, i.e. unclean and not in accordance with social and religious conventions. Deuteronomy uses the term for everything that is contrary to the cult of Yhwh as postulated by the deuteronomistic reform. According to deuteronomistic theology, which begins to flourish towards the end of the 7th century BCE, Yhwh cannot be connected to a goddess or to cultic practices that one could describe as popular religion. As a result, the prohibition of Deut 23:18-19 targets the annihilation of cultic practices in sanctuaries of Yhwh that are connected to sexual acts.

Leviticus 18 and 20

In contrast to Deuteronomy, Leviticus 18 and 20 specifically prohibits same-sex relations amongst men.

18:22 You shall not sleep with a man as one sleeps with a woman; it is an abomination (תועבה).

20:13 If a man sleeps with a male as one sleeps with a woman the two of them have committed an abomination (תועבה); they must be put to death – their bloodguilt is upon them.

The verses belong in the context of the so-called Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26). Several recent studies have shown that the Holiness Code was composed during the Persian period in a move to expand the Priestly laws in Lev 1-16 in order to add stipulations about ethical problems (of social, sexual and economic kind) and about the purity of the people of Yhwh; and to mediate between the deuteronomistic and priestly theology.⁵ As for chapters Lev 18 and 20, one mainly finds instructions that address forbidden sexual relations.

³ English translation according NELSON 2002, 275.

⁴ BRAULIK 1992, 173-174; ROSE 1994, 317-319; more cautious is NELSON 2002, 280-282, who argues that it is »unlikely that anything like cult prostitution was practiced in Israel« (280). He fails, however, to provide reasons for such a view.

⁵ See already GRELOT 1956 and OTTO 1994, 65-80; NIIHAN 2004; HIEKE 2014, 612-613.

Despite broad congruence, both prohibitions are not identical. Leviticus 18 contains direct prohibitions with the use of the Imperative (*šō' + yiqtol*), while Leviticus 20 offers a list of various acts into which the extent of the punishment is inserted for each case. Specifically, Leviticus 18 is a catalogue of prohibitions against incest and other forms of forbidden sexual relations (v. 6-23). The list is framed by general admonitions that impress upon the readers that they should differ in their actions from the surrounding nations (v. 1-5; 24-30). Leviticus 20 lists almost the same prohibitions as Leviticus 18, but some other cases and sentences are added (e.g. the prohibition of sexual intercourse during menstruation in v. 18). Leviticus 20 is most likely a later radicalizing addition to the Holiness Code that toughens the general prohibitions of Leviticus 18 by introducing the (probably theoretical) threat of the death penalty.⁶ Also, Lev 18:22 seems to refer only to one of the two protagonists. In contrast Lev 20:13 exacerbates the tone, mentions the penalty, and regards both men as equally guilty.⁷ For this reason, some scholars, e.g., Saul Olyan, argue for two redactional processes.⁸ The first editorial hand (v. 13ac) only targets one culprit, i.e. the active partner, while the second editor adds the passive partner (v. 13ab), sentencing him to the same penalty as the other. Indeed, the abrupt transition to the plural can be used as an argument for this hypothesis. On the other hand, the expansion can be explained equally well by positing only one redactor, who stayed close to his *Vortage* in Lev 18:22 and simply modified and expanded it. Specifically, in contrast to Lev 18:22, Lev 20:13 mentions a prohibition and sentence for both participants.

A further distinction becomes apparent in relation to other Ancient Near Eastern legal texts and other statements of prohibition in the Holiness Code: the social status of both men is not mentioned. Undoubtedly the regulations of the Holiness Code – like all the other biblical laws – are addressed to free persons; the status of the passive partner, however, is not stated.¹⁰

Jacob Milgrom stresses the fact that most of the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 refer to unwarranted sexual relations within the family or the clan. He concludes that the prohibition of male sexual relations in Leviticus 18 and 20 only concerns men within the limited circle of family.¹¹ This interpretation, however, is hardly convincing. The protagonists in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 are not

⁶ See NIIHAN 2007, 446-459.

⁷ At first 20:13 is quite close to 18:22 (if a man sleeps with a male as one sleeps with a woman ...). Only 20:13ab expands the offense making both protagonists the guilty party (‘... the two of them have done an abomination’).
⁸ OLYAN 1994.

⁹ On this technique see LEVINSON 2002.

¹⁰ See WALSH 2001.

¹¹ MILGROM 2000, 1786. He even proposes that if gay partners adopt children, they do not violate the intent of the prohibition (1568, see also 1787). This may be an understandable political and ethical position in regard to the biblical text; however, it is an anachronism.

described as being family members or relatives. Also, we have to note the position of the verses within the context of chapters 18 and 20. The author of Leviticus 18 has already left the circle of the family when the prohibition of homosexual relations is introduced, while Leviticus 20 orients itself on the *sequence* of the prohibitions, that is, not on the family relationship of the partners but on the individual offence.

Olyan and Walsh both argue that the prohibition »to sleep with a man as one sleeps with a woman« refers specifically to anal intercourse and not to homosexuality in general.¹² This interpretation, also found in rabbinical commentaries, rightly stresses that the scandal of same-sex relations between males is the fact that one partner takes the passive role, which is normally reserved for the woman. We cannot, however, deduce from this that the authors of Leviticus 18 and 20 would tolerate other sexual practices among men. Indeed the terminology rather points to the crossing of boundaries between sexes (you shall not sleep with a man as one sleeps with a woman«). Additionally it is quite remarkable that female homosexual relations are not mentioned. This phenomenon confirms that the audience of the Holiness Code were free men. Leviticus 18 and 20 can only be understood against the background of the ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the role of the sexes.

To this the authors of the Holiness Code add the topic of the distinction and separation of Israel from the other nations, which is treated at the beginning and end of the chapter in Lev 18:3, 24, and at the end of the chapter in Lev 20:23-24. The sexual taboos of both chapters are also legitimated by making them part of a strategy of separation from other nations, even though most of the taboos were also respected in the Ancient Near East and Egypt. Here, it may even be the case that we have a polemic against Greek sexual practices, something that cannot be excluded if one dates the Holiness Code to the Persian Period.

Such a date for composition may also allow for further conjectures about Persian influence on the Holiness Code. In the Avesta, the holy book of Zoroastrianism, we find the following passage (*Vedidad* 8:32):

»The man that lies with mankind as man lies with womankind, or as woman lies with mankind, is the man that is a Daeva; this one is the man that is a worshipper of the Daevas, that is a male paramour of the Daevas, that is a female paramour of the Daevas, that is a wife to the Daeva; this is the man that is as bed as a Daeva, that is in his whole being a Daeva.«¹³

The similarities with the texts from Leviticus are obvious.¹⁴ The authors of the Holiness Code were perhaps inspired by Persian laws that were even more intolerant towards homosexual relationships.

¹² Cf. OLYAN 1994 and WALSH 2001.

¹³ English translation according to DARMESTETER 1880.

¹⁴ With one major difference: the Avesta also deals with female homosexuality.

Further, one has to understand the purity laws and ethical stipulations of the Holiness Code within the framework of a process of theological transformation that aims at a transcendent deity. The monotheistic view of God that became more and more prominent during the Persian period also implies a change in the perception of sexuality. After Yhwh had become the one and only God, there was no longer room for a female deity at his side. This transformation may also have triggered a certain suspicion in priestly circles in regard to sexuality.

Consequently, sexuality in priestly texts is only legitimate in the course of procreation (Gen 1:28).¹⁵ For the priestly writers, sexuality is no longer part of youth and enjoyment of life: in the priestly version of the Abraham narrative a hundred year old Abraham fathers a child with divine help with an aged Sarah to provide for himself a descendant born from his principal wife. Leviticus 18 and 20 must be understood against a similar background. According to Leviticus 18 and 20, at the time the text was composed, the persons with whom a man is prohibited from having sexual relations are identical with the group of female relatives, who belonged to the same clan or lived together in a polygamous extended family. Moreover, it is completely impossible to have sexual intercourse with the wife of another free man (Lev 18:20) as this would imply a questioning of the family structure (the man must be certain that he is the father of his wife's children). Somewhat unexpectedly the prohibition of child sacrifice to »Molech« is mentioned in v. 21, a topic that occurs in more detail again in 20:2-5.¹⁶ The reason for this insertion may have been the idea that the procreation of children should serve to establish a chain of generations that should not be risked by child sacrifice. In Leviticus 18 (and 20) sexuality has little to do with love but with role allocations and important basic cultural distinctions between what belongs to a man and what to his neighbour, between male and female, and between human and animal. Therefore zoophilia (often wrongly labelled sodomy) is also forbidden (v. 23); here the woman is introduced for the first time as a possible actor, since in the hierarchies of antiquity, women could not command men but animals.

2. SODOM AND GOMORRAH — ALL SODOMITES?

The story about the destruction of one, maybe two cities in Genesis 19 has been and still is a key-text used in Jewish-Christian tradition to condemn homosexuality.¹⁷ The terms »sodomy« and »sodomites« derive from this narrative and several commentators even until today argue that the homosexual behaviour of the inhabitants was the reason why the whole population of Sodom and Gomorrah

was wiped out.¹⁸ The demand of the inhabitants of Sodom »bring them out so that we may 'know' them« (Gen 19:5b) is often understood as an expression of homosexual desire of the male inhabitants of Sodom. The sexual connotation of the root יָרָא cannot be denied. Nevertheless, scholars like R.C. Bailey insist that while the verb יָרָא may describe sexual relations, it would only describe heterosexual relations.¹⁹ For homosexual encounters (Lev 18:22; 20:13) the Hebrew Bible would use נָשָׂא. Therefore the verb יָרָא in Gen 19:5b is used with the meaning יָרָא to get to know somebody«. Lot, who is explicitly addressed by the inhabitants of the city as a foreigner, exceeded his legal status by receiving two unknown persons into his home, since the intentions of his guests could have been hostile and, obviously, their identity was not vetted. This explanation, then, would provide sufficient reason for their expectation (»Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may get to know them«). For verse 5 alone such an explanation may be possible. The continuation of the story, however, makes it impossible. Lot's response to offer his two virgin daughters instead of the visitors, clearly demonstrates that the men of Sodom have some form of sexual aggression in mind. Lot's initiative, however, shows that he does not regard the inhabitants of Sodom as homosexuals per se as he offers his daughters in exchange. Additionally the narrative itself militates against the idea that all the inhabitants of Sodom were homosexual (v. 4: »the men of Sodom, young and old – all the people to the last man«). The statement in Gen 19:4 that all the people of Sodom take part in the aggression probably wants to emphasize that Lot's future sons-in-law were among them too.

It is, therefore, not the assumed homosexuality of the townspeople that causes judgement but the collective desire to rape. To support this interpretation, let us look at another biblical text that helps to illuminate the subject. The story of the Levite in the hills of Ephraim in Judg 19:15-29 offers close parallels to the narrative in Gen 19.

In Judg 19 we find the same structure, the same type of narrative, and several identical formulations as in Genesis 19. All this allows for the assumption that both texts have a literary relation:²⁰

- The inhabitants of the two cities where the visitors plan to spend the night are not greatly hospitable.
- The host, who takes them in, is himself a foreigner.
- In the evening his house is surrounded by hostile and aggressive inhabitants of the city.
- They want to »know« (יָרָא) the guests.
- One or two virgin daughters are offered as substitution.
- The hostility of the inhabitants is set in contrast to the hospitality of the host.

¹⁵ See e.g. GUNDEL 1902, 215; RUPPERT 2002, 415-416.

¹⁹ BAILEY 1996.

²⁰ Both texts have been compared in the past; see the more recent studies by STONE 1995; LANOIR 2005, 191-199, 317-321.

¹⁵ Other forms of sexuality are probably classified under the rubric of chaos; see BAUKS 2001.

¹⁶ On the topic see RÖMER 1999.

¹⁷ See CARDEN 2004.

- Both stories are preceded by a story of a grand display of hospitality (Abraham in Gen 18 and the father of the secondary wife in Judg 19:1-4).
- The cities are destroyed and their inhabitants are killed.

It is difficult to determine the direction of the literary dependence. The majority of commentators assume that Gen 19 serves as the *Vorlage* for Judg 19.²¹ The author of Judg 19 had then incorporated the story into a longer episode (the story of the Levite in Judg 19-20) to show that the period of the Judges ends in complete depravity (Judg 21:25: »In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased«) and that the crime of the inhabitants of Sodom was emulated by an Israelite (Benjamin) tribe.

There is, however, one major difference between the two stories. Judg 19 does not have a »happy ending«. The secondary wife dies after she was raped and abused (»known«) all night long by the inhabitants of Gibeah. Nobody would deny that »to know« has a sexual connotation here and, equally, nobody would argue that the denunciation of the homosexuality of the inhabitants of Gibeah is the point of the story. It is clear that – after the rape and the murder of the secondary wife – the main topics are the readiness to use violence and the arrogance of the aggressors. Additionally it is interesting that nobody would condemn heterosexual relationships on the basis of this story. The topic that addressed here is rape, i.e. sexuality devoid of a social connection that transforms the other to a mere object in a move to satisfy ones own desire.

Therefore the stories of Sodom and Gibeah deal with sexual violence. Its damnation does not equal a rejection of sexuality as such. Rather, what is criticized here is the complete violation of law and hospitality. The question remains as to why the authors illustrate the violation of the sacred institution of hospitality by using the motif of a gang rape of a peaceful foreigner. The most plausible explanation is probably found in the concepts of power as known in the Ancient Near East. We find, indeed, acts of anal penetration in military contexts in Mesopotamia and Greece.²² The act strips the defeated person of his honour and of his male status. The same idea is found in the myth of Horus and Seth.²³ This would mean that the act that the inhabitants of Sodom planned on doing was aimed at demonstrating their superiority over the foreigners. As a result, the daughters of Lot were not enough, for, with them, they were unable to perform the feminization of the male visitors through rape.

The use of the motif of rape to express the utmost violation of law and hospitality shows the significance and seriousness of such an abuse in the social world of the Hebrew Bible, where it is punished by the complete destruction of the habitat of the culprits. To break with the elementary rule of society (of which

²¹ E.g. HARVEY 2004, 90-93; LANOIR 2005, 194.

²² See NISSINEN 1998, 26-27 etc. The feminization of male prisoners through rape is still practiced today in a military context; see GRUNDMANN 2000.

²³ See WESTENDORF 1972, 1272-1273; PARKINSON 1995, 64-68; WALLS 2001, 98-125.

hospitality and bodily integrity are part) is likely a destructive act of cosmic dimensions that cannot be compensated by individual punishment.

Further interpretations of the sin or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are found in the Hebrew Bible itself, especially in the prophetic tradition. Here the fate of the two cities is employed as a warning for other cities that do not respect the elementary rules of social behaviour. None of these interpretations evokes an act of a sexual nature, and even less of homosexuality. Rather, the focus is on pride, worthlessness, and on hostility towards foreigners. Thus we read in Ezek 16:49ff. (see also Jer 23:14; Sir 16:8; Deut 29:22):

(49) Only this was the sin of your sister Sodom: Arrogance! She and her daughters had plenty of bread and untroubled tranquillity; yet she did not support the poor and the needy. (50) In their haughtiness, they committed abomination before me; and so I removed them, as you saw.

The interpretation of the sin of Sodom as a violation of hospitality is also found in the New Testament. In the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus predicts the rejection of his disciples in several cities (Luke 10:10-12):

(10) But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, (11) Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near. (12) I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.²⁴

According to this text the sin of Sodom still concerns showing respect towards guests. How is it possible, then, that later interpretation connects it with the punishment of homosexual relationships? The origin of such an interpretation can possibly be attributed to Judaism's interaction with Greek culture during the 3rd century BCE. During this epoch, Jews, living under Greek rule, were confronted with Greek customs such as pederasty and nakedness during sports competitions. We have to assume that that during this time Sodom became a symbol for Greek civilization, which »orthodox« Judaism fought against or only accepted hesitantly. Retellings of the story of Sodom as found in Jubilees 16; Testament of Naphtali 3; Testament of Levi 14:6 castigate homosexual relationships but also speak against several acts of »fornication«, i.e. any form of sexuality that does not serve procreative purposes (the Letter of Jude mentions Sodom and Gomorrah in a similar fashion).²⁵

In contrast to Leviticus 18 and 20 and Genesis 19, which played an important role in the Jewish-Christian damnation of homosexual relationships the

²⁴ See also Mt 11:24.

²⁵ Judas 7 most likely uses Genesis 19 but interprets it in such a way that the inhabitants of the city now desired to have sex with divine beings, the angels. Therefore it wrong to accuse the opponents in Jude of homosexual acts (see BAUCKHAM 1983, 54 and VÖGTLÉ 1994, 43).

story of David, Saul and Jonathan attracted much less attention. This story, however, will become more significant for our topic when we compare it with the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the greatest epics of humanity.

3. GILGAMESH AND ENKIDU, JONATHAN AND DAVID — ATTEMPTING A COMPARISON²⁶

The comparison of two literary corpora always poses methodological questions. How can we compare texts that stem from different epochs and cultures? Naturally, both texts have quite a different status. The story of David and Jonathan was transmitted as part of a religious tradition that led to a monotheistic belief system. The Epic of Gilgamesh on the other hand belonged to the context of a quite complex polytheistic world where gods are ubiquitous. Nevertheless a comparison can be justified. First, both literary works are rooted in the Semitic mentality of the Ancient Near East. During the redaction of the books of Samuel the kingdom of Judah was first under Assyrian and then under Babylonian rule.²⁷ It is therefore quite likely that the intellectuals who wrote and revised the David narrative knew the Epic of Gilgamesh and read it at the royal court. The comparison is further justified with respect to the literary composition: both texts are concerned with a deep friendship and share several common motifs and expressions.

Epic and Historiography

Obviously, both compositions differ in their form and intention. The books of Samuel bear witness to a first attempt of Judean historiography conceived during a process of intellectual formation of high functionaries at the royal court. David is portrayed as Yhwh's chosen one and his success corresponds to the divine plan. The history of the beginnings of the Judean monarchy legitimizes the Davidic dynasty.²⁸

The story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu belongs to the context of epic. It was not composed to interpret historical facts but contains a reflection on basic anthropological conditions. As such it served as entertainment and instruction for its readers.²⁹

The difference between the story of David and Jonathan and Gilgamesh and Enkidu is also apparent when we look at the space that is given to the loving relationship of the protagonists. In the Epic of Gilgamesh this love is a main

topic used to develop much of the following plot, while the report about the loving relation between David and Jonathan in the History of David's Rise reads like one motif amongst others.

The Birth of a Friendship

The first similarity is the comparable social status of the emerging friendships. In both narratives we encounter persons who are military heroes.³⁰ In both cases warriors are attracted to one another.³¹

In the Epic of Gilgamesh the prostitute tells Enkidu about the strength of Gilgamesh who then dreams about challenging him to a fight. In the story of David and Jonathan, David is introduced to Jonathan who distinguished himself in the battle against the Philistines directly after his defeat of Goliath. The friendship that emerges is similar in both literary works: a skilled warrior of non noble birth meets the king or the crown prince who suddenly forms a deep bond with him and elevates him to his own status. Both pairs live at the royal court allowing great intimacy.

It is obvious that the story of David and Jonathan is fitted into the History of David's Rise and this aspect of the story is but one element among others. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, by contrast, the friendship between the king and Enkidu, as well as the death of the latter, forms the center of the narrative as a whole. The bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is so strong that even Ishtar, the goddess of love, fails in her attempt to seduce Gilgamesh.³²

In both accounts we note a certain asymmetry in regard to social standing. One of the partners owes his social rise to a favour from a friend who spontaneously elevates him to the same status. In the Mesopotamian epic King Gilgamesh takes center stage, while in the books of Samuel the crown prince recedes completely behind the shepherd boy so that the latter can become king. In each narrative the subordinate hero plays a less enviable role, because he is simply the proxy whose death enables the survivor to fulfil his destiny. The death of Enkidu serves to initiate Gilgamesh's quest for immortality, and the death of Jonathan (like Saul's death) allows David to become king over Israel.

A further asymmetry in the relationship that connects both pairs is apparent in the stories. Both begin with the arrival of a man at court, David and Enkidu, who immediately wins the trust and friendship of the (future) king. Then, however, both stories begin to differ. Enkidu remains the companion to the king while David, as Yhwh's chosen one, begins to take precedence over Jonathan.

³⁰ HALPERIN 1990, 75-87, adds to his comparison of these stories of friendship the episodes about Achilles and Patroclus from Homer's Iliad. In the three narratives he finds a common concern: the attempt to construct and to codify a concept of friendship that tries to elude all categories of social obligation, common in the culture of the protagonists.

³¹ The author of the narrative of David's rise places the accentuation on the attraction that David exerts over Jonathan.

³² In the aftermath of her failed attempt, she intervenes by the gods to have Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed; in a similar fashion Saul plots to kill David when he hears about his close relationship to Jonathan.

²⁶ For the following see RÖMER/BONJOUR 2016 and ACKERMANN 2005.

²⁷ An overview of the discussion of the complex literary origin of the stories of David can be found in BOSWORTH 2006 and DIETRICH 2016, 232-259.

²⁸ It remains to be seen whether this pro-Davidic history contains any pre-deuteronomistic forms.

²⁹ On the origin of the Epic of Gilgamesh, its variants, and precursors, see the excellent edition of GEORGE, 2003.

In the first chapters of the narrative it is David who sees Jonathan and asks him for help, but from 1 Samuel 20 onwards it will be Jonathan who asks David for protection for himself and his descendants.

The structure of the love in both narratives does not follow a completely parallel scheme but is based on the structuring principle, i.e. the relationship between a king/crown-prince and his dearly beloved friend. The same topic is also found in Greek culture in the friendship between Achilles and Patroklos. Additionally one could mention the eroticized friendships of Emperor Hadrian or Alexander the Great. In all these examples we encounter a politically and socially rooted friendship that binds a king to one of his subjects forming a bond that is extraordinary strong.

Two Special Friendships

Both stories are characterized by a certain exclusivity that embodies the relationship among friends.³³ It is a friendship that is an unrivalled friendship: neither a woman, nor another hero, and not even a goddess can compete with it. The reason for such a deep bond is never given, and the first encounter of the protagonists appears quite similar to love at first sight.³⁴

In both cases the partner immediately and openly accepts the royal status of the main character. When praising Gilgamesh, Enkidu states:

Raised up above men is thy head.
Kingship over the people
Enlil has granted thee!³⁵

Jonathan, too, openly acknowledges the royal fate of David ascribed to him by Yhw: »May Yhw be with you as he used to be with my father« (1Sam 20:13). The making of a covenant or a friendship pact is a further common motif of both narratives, although 1 Samuel depicts the topic in more detail than the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Additionally we have to note that both texts contain scenes describing bodily contact between the friends. The protagonists kiss and embrace each other. Gilgamesh and Enkidu even hold hands. In scenes where the characters part there are plenty of tears. David bends down his head before Jonathan and Jonathan removes his clothes in front of David. In both cases the physical expressions appear more intense than the spoken words. It is hardly possible to describe the vital bond that connects the friends in more powerful terms. It is a bond that goes beyond the constraints of normal friendships and evokes pictures of a pair of lovers. Additionally we have to note the similar vocabulary

³³ In the biblical story the relationship between Jonathan and David is connected to the jealousy of Jonathan's father Saul so that Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli may be correct when speaking about a *ménage à trois* (SCHROER/STAUBLI 1996).

³⁴ In the Epic of Gilgamesh both protagonists desire the other because of dreams or depictions before even meeting each other.

³⁵ Quoted acc. to ANET, 78 (6: 237-240).

describing the connection between the figures. The phrase »to love the other as himself« is used repeatedly to describe the love of Jonathan and David. The prostitute speaks in a similar way of the love Enkidu feels for Gilgamesh. To accentuate the strength of the feeling connecting the friends, both narratives use kinship terms: the partners see each other as brothers. The motif of consanguinity may be the most powerful way of expressing the love that binds the partners together, as it suggests the idea of duration.³⁶ Furthermore, both narratives contain passages that paint the relationship between the friends in very female expressions. Gilgamesh cloaks Enkidu's body with a veil like a bride,³⁷ or he dreams of him as being his wife.³⁸

Also, we find some sexually toned situations in both narratives. For the Epic of Gilgamesh we have already mentioned Gilgamesh's dreams that show him Enkidu's arrival and contain sexual wordplays and symbols.³⁹ Additionally one could refer to the journey to the cedar woods;⁴⁰ here it is described that Gilgamesh and Enkidu go to sleep holding hands.⁴¹

After their return journey, which they made entwined, they sleep together in one bed.⁴² Also the harsh (and absurd) rejection of Ishtar by Gilgamesh can be understood as him being only attracted to Enkidu.⁴³

In 1 Samuel this (homoerotic) dimension is far less concrete and many expressions and metaphors chosen to describe David's and Jonathan's friendship are ambiguous and can equally be understood within the framework of political rhetoric (e.g. the covenant; to love somebody as himself).⁴⁴ Nevertheless the use of the verb »to desire« (רָצַח in 1 Sam 19:1) allows one to argue for an erotic or sexual dimension. The encounter of the two friends in the field (1 Sam 18:1; 1 Sam 20:11) uses a topic often employed in erotic poetry (Cant 1:7; 3:1-4; 7:12). Additional situations can be interpreted in this sense too.⁴⁵ Especially the first meeting of the two during which Jonathan disrobes himself in front of David

³⁶ See also the expression «sister» and «brother» in Song of Songs.

³⁷ Tablet VIII, col. 2:15-20.

³⁸ See Tablet I, col. 4:25-5:5 (Nineveh version) and Tablet II, col. 1:30-35 (old-Babylonian version).

³⁹ Cf. TOURNAY/SHAFFER 1998, 61, note y and 63, note c.

⁴⁰ For a quite complete list of possible homoerotic scenes in the Epic of Gilgamesh, see WALLS 2001, 11-18.

⁴¹ Tablet IV, col. 1:5-7 acc. to the Boghazköy fragment (KUB 4:12).

⁴² Tablet VI, col. 4:27-6:19 (Nineveh version). The sexual allusions here are quite clear, see ZIEGLER 2011.

⁴³ See WALLS 2001, 34-50, who favors this assumption as a way of solving the "interpretative crux" posed by Gilgamesh's rejection of the goddess (42).

⁴⁴ For this interpretation, see MORAN 1963; EDLIMAN 1988.

⁴⁵ Thus e.g. the embracing in tears and the kisses in 1 Sam 20:41. Note the interesting text-critical problems of the verse, which one could interpret in the not very politically correct sense that David got an erection, see NARBELLI 2007, 27.

(1Sam 18:4). This gesture may certainly express the idea of Jonathan's submission,⁴⁶ but is it really necessary that Jonathan strips completely only to acknowledge David's claim to kingship?⁴⁷

Love and Death

It is ultimately the elegies of David and Gilgamesh that show the public that the vanished partner was much more than a confidant or ally.

⁴⁶I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan
You were most dear to me.

Your love was wonderful to me,
More than the love of women.

⁴⁷How have the mighty fallen,
The weapons of war perished!
(2Sam 1:26-27)

Listen to me, elders of Uruk, listen to me!
I myself must weep for Enkidu my friend,
mourn bitterly like a weeping woman.

As for the axe at my side,⁴⁸ spur to my arm,
The sword in my belt, the shield for my front,
My festival clothes, my many sash:
Evil [Fate (?)] rose up and robbed me of them

...
My friend has covered his face like a daughter-in-law.
He circled over him like an eagle,
Like a lioness whose cubs are [trapped] in a pit,

He paced back and forth.
He (?) tore out and spoilt (?) well curled hair,
He stripped off and threw away finery as if it were taboo.⁴⁹

Here the death of the close friend almost becomes an indispensable prerequisite to understand the strength of the bond uniting the pairs. The despair expressed is obviously the expression of a loss of love that the surviving partner has not felt for anybody else. Rather paradoxically the death of the friend underscores the fragility of love as well as its solidity since the surviving partner will never forget the departed friend.

⁴⁶ Thus most scholars following THOMPSON 1974.

⁴⁷ For these scenes, see SCHROEYER/STAUBLI 1996, who may overemphasize the erotic dimension of some scenes. The critique of ZEHNDER 1998, however, falls short, as it displays a similar ideological drive that he criticizes in SCHROEYER/STAUBLI 1996. See the objective discussion in NISSINEN 1999. The erotic components of the scenes involving David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel is also investigated by ACKERMANN 2005, 174-199. FELEG 2005, 171-189, argues that Jonathan develops an erotic desire towards David and that this trait is used in the course of the narrative to feminize him and to legitimate David. There are, however, several indicators (not least in the dirge) showing that David is equally attracted to Jonathan. See NISSINEN 1999, 259 note 36.

⁴⁸ This expression alludes to the erotic dreams of Gilgamesh at the beginning of the epic.
⁴⁹ Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet VIII, col. 2. 1-22 (Ninevite version); English translation acc. to DALLEY 1991, 92-93.

David mourns Jonathan and qualifies his love to him as being »more than the love of women«. If »love of women« (אֶהָבָה אֶת־אִשָּׁה) is a sexually or at least erotically connoted expression we would have here an allusion to the homoerotic character of the relationship of David and Jonathan.⁵⁰

The comparison of the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu with the one of David and Jonathan has revealed several parallels. These parallels, however, should not mask the differences that exist too. Nevertheless, both texts describe a deep relationship between two men, a relationship that transcends the protagonists themselves and displays absolute intimacy between the two partners.

One has to state that, to a certain degree, the love between the two protagonists – in both the epic and the Bible – has its origin in the divine will with which no one can interfere. The close and intimate relationship between the two partners is expressed by use of metaphors for marriage and erotic imagery. Obviously these, too, imply the sexual dimension. Both narratives construe a form of a prototypical heroic male friendship that can be shaped by erotic elements. Because of this similarity we have to ask whether we can reconstruct a literary dependency between the two texts. It would, indeed, be possible to argue for a certain influence of the Gilgamesh epic upon the David and Jonathan story. Perhaps the redactor of 1 Samuel (or the redactor of the David and Jonathan story if it had a distinct redactor) was familiar with the epic since, for example, a fragment of Gilgamesh was found at Meggido.⁵¹ During the Assyrian period (8th – 7th century BCE), i.e. the period when one generally assumes the History of David's Rise was composed, the Gilgamesh Epic was widely distributed.⁵² The author was then able to include in his composition motifs of the legendary king to stress the significance of the king who founded the Judean dynasty.⁵³ As a result, David too becomes an archetypal king of the Ancient Near East: he is a heroic warrior, a protégé of the gods, audacious, beautiful and able, beloved by his friends.

In light of the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu the relationship between David and Jonathan looks more like a love story than a reading of 1 Samuel may suggest at first glance. This story, however, was later edited to tone down some erotic elements.

Both stories never describe the sexual relationship between the two friends directly; this poses the question how important or evident the sexual component really is. Undoubtedly the answer also depends on the sensitivity of the reader.⁵⁴ It is quite interesting to note that Jewish and Christian exegetes often declare

⁵⁰ Thus OLVAN 2006, 7-16, esp. 12-13.

⁵¹ This fragment, however, has to be dated to the 14th century BCE; see TOURNAY/SHAPPER 1998, 34.

⁵² See KAISER 1990.

⁵³ Here one could compare the History of David's Rise with the adoption of the Sargon legend as part of the history of Moses' birth in Exodus 2.

⁵⁴ One can of course read the story in the context of a queer theology, as does HEACOCK 2011.

rather apodictically that the story of David and Jonathan has nothing to do with homosexuality – as if such a reading would devalue the figure of David.

Painters and novelists, however, are far more sensitive when it comes to depicting the erotic character of the relationship of the future king with Saul's son. In his book, *King David*, Allan Massie, for example, lets David remember his sexual relations with Jonathan. It remains to be seen whether one wants to interpret the story in the matter proposed by the novelist, but the comparison with the Epic of Gilgamesh has shown that Ancient Near Eastern culture generally allows for – and on a literary level even suggests – an intimate and erotic relationship between men.⁵⁵

4. CONCLUSION

No text of the Hebrew Bible (and also no text of the New Testament⁵⁶) speaks about homosexuality as a social phenomenon to describe loving and sexual same sex relations. As a result one has to seriously question the use of different biblical texts in contemporary and ecclesial debates. Texts like Leviticus 18 and 20 reflect the understanding of gender in the Ancient Near East, as well as a view of sexuality, that is exclusively concerned with procreation. Genesis 19 and Judges 19 denounce sexual violence and do not offer a theory of homosexual fornication. In the story of David and Jonathan we find an erotically tinted loving relationship between men. This story has to be related to Epic of Gilgamesh and here too one has to avoid anachronistic interpretations. When we explore biblical concepts of Eros and sexuality, the narrative of 1 Samuel 18 – 2 Samuel 1 should however not be ignored.

⁵⁵ See S. ACKERMANN 2005, who works with the concept of liminality. According to COMSTOCK 1992, the David-Jonathan narrative conscientiously operates with ambiguities to make an erotic relationship between men acceptable. The conventional and socially acceptable language and form of covenant, friendship, politics, elegy, and soldiering may have been used to tell a love story which needed both to remain within what was socially acceptable as well as to break with convention ... (23).

⁵⁶ See the overview in NISSINEN 1998, 103-134 and MARTIN 1995.

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