


## Homosexuality in the Pontifical Biblical Commission Document *What Is Man?*

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**ABSTRACT:** Considerable public attention has been given to the treatment of homosexuality in the recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man? A Journey through Biblical Anthropology*. Some reports have claimed that the document represents a shift in Catholic teaching toward the acceptance of homosexual acts. This article assesses that claim by carefully examining the relevant sections of the document in the perspective of its wider reflections on biblical anthropology and on the biblical vision of the institution of marriage. While the document situates the biblical texts concerning homosexuality within their literary and cultural contexts and emphasises the pastoral sensitivity with which this topic must be approached, it does not promote a revision or reversal of the Church's teaching on sexual morality.

**KEYWORDS:** homosexuality, sexual morality, Sodom, Gibeah, anthropology, Pontifical Biblical Commission, marriage

When the Vatican first published the Pontifical Biblical Commission document *What Is Man? A Journey through Biblical Anthropology* in Italian in December 2019, some media commentators, both on the left and on the right, seem to have skipped over the first two hundred pages and opened immediately to the section on homosexuality. There were headlines such as “New Vatican Book Reinterprets Sin of Sodom,” “PBC Whitewashes Homosexual Fornication,” and “PBC moves to justify divorce, more ‘pastoral care’ for gays.” What is the basis for these claims? Are they correct? Does the document misrepresent biblical teaching on sexual morality, or seek to change Catholic doctrine? The present essay seeks to clarify what the PBC document actually says about homosexuality within the context of its reflections on biblical anthropology.

The document takes up the topic of homosexuality in its third chapter, “The human family,” which concerns human interrelationships in all their forms. Within that chapter is a section on “The love between man and woman,” with a subsection on “The marriage union in human history.” Within the latter subsection there is a smaller unit dealing with

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“improper behaviours,” including incest, adultery, prostitution, and homosexual acts. By this arrangement the PBC document indicates that the biblical references to homosexuality can be interpreted properly only in the context of the biblical vision of the institution of marriage as “the design willed by the Creator for the human being (Gen 1–2).”<sup>1</sup> While this vision is sketched in Genesis 1–2 and developed later by the wisdom traditions of Israel, the Bible in its realism also makes reference to various problematic situations and practices, including homosexual acts, which “disfigure the perfect form of the spousal union set forth by God.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, this article will first summarize the PBC document’s reflections on the biblical understanding of marriage, and then examine its analysis of the biblical texts that refer to homosexual practice.

## 1. The Biblical Vision of Marriage

The PBC notes that the Bible’s first reference to human beings introduces the aspect of sexual differentiation: “male and female he created them” (Gen 1:26–27). The duality of male and female means that “each person will be in the image of God in a specific bodily form, with all that this implies, and in a relationship with the other, who is different from oneself.”<sup>3</sup> God’s creation of the human couple is, moreover, “immediately linked to the act of divine blessing which expresses itself as a call to fruitfulness (Gen 1:28). *Children are born of the couple* and they in turn are called upon to be fruitful and multiply; from the initial encounter innumerable offspring of humankind descend (Gen 5:1–32; 10:1–32).”<sup>4</sup> Sexual differentiation is thus intrinsically tied to the act of procreation, by which human beings become co-creators with God and thereby carry out a central aspect of their vocation as the bearers of his image on earth (cf. Gen 5:3). Through their spousal union the man and woman will “replicate that image by bringing forth children... who likewise will bear the divine imprint.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s blessing of the human couple (Gen 1:28) is similar to his blessing of the fish and birds (v. 22), but with a subtle difference: God directly addresses the man and woman (ויאמר להם אלהים) thereby inviting them into communion with himself.<sup>6</sup> The commission that he confers on them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (v. 28), gives them responsibility over their reproductive powers. Thus although the sexual

1 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man? A Journey through Biblical Anthropology* (trans. F. O’Fearthail – A. Graffy) (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 2021) no. 171. Here and throughout, references to the document are given by paragraph number.

2 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 171.

3 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 48.

4 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 151. In all quotations from the PBC document, italics are as in the original.

5 J.C. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family. The Domestic Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press 2014) 63.

6 See N.M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society 1989) 13.

complementarity of human beings is analogous to that which exists in the animal world, it transcends it. As the PBC states,

Sirach notes that God created all things “in pairs, by opposites” so that “one thing complements the excellence of another” (Sir 42:24–25).... If human beings are in fact similar to animals because like them they are “male and female”, they are nevertheless also similar to God because they are capable of giving life in love and for love: human generation cannot therefore be described simply as the fruit of a carnal relationship, because it is able to express a “divine” quality when it takes place according to the way in which God gives life to every person, that is, in gratuitous generosity.<sup>7</sup>

In the second creation account (Gen 2:4–25), similar themes are expressed in a different and less poetic literary mode. Here too the narrative highlights the common human nature of the man and woman, but at the same time their distinctness. God first fashions man (הָאָדָם: v. 7), which as the PBC notes is probably intended to represent human nature in the abstract, apart from sexual distinction.<sup>8</sup> God’s remark that “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18) indicates that the work of creation is as yet incomplete and inadequate.<sup>9</sup> God then resolves the crisis of אָדָם in solitude not by fashioning a replica of him, but by fashioning from his side (מִצַּלְעָתוֹ) a complementary being who is different yet intimately related to him, with whom he yearns to be reunited.<sup>10</sup> Only now are they two sexually differentiated beings, אִישׁ (man) and אִשָּׁה (woman) (v. 23).<sup>11</sup> Genesis insists on the specific sexual identity of each, expressed for the man in “closing the flesh up again” (v. 21) and for the woman in being “built” (בְּנָה: v. 22), which alludes to her potential to generate children (בְּנִים).<sup>12</sup> Likewise the etymological link between אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה shows their “kinship” but “highlights at the same time the difference that leads to the spousal union (v. 24) that is necessary for the procreation of life.”<sup>13</sup> By accenting the male–female distinction, the narrator conveys that it is through the complementarity of their bodies—their sexual differences that make fruitful union possible—that the man and woman perceive their call to spousal

7 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 48.

8 “It is not the solitude of the male but that of the human being that is remedied by the creation of man and woman” (*ibidem*, 153). Pope John Paul II takes the same approach in his reflections on the theology of the body (General Audience of Oct. 10, 1979, in *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body* [trans. M. Waldstein] [Boston, MA: Pauline 2006] 147).

9 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 73.

10 See F. Martin, *Sacred Scripture. The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples, FL: Sapientia 2006) 201; R.A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice. Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 2001) 60–61. Although צֶלַע is traditionally translated “rib,” in nearly all other OT uses it simply means “side,” and Adam’s exclamation in 2:23 implies that the woman was taken not only from his “bone” but also from his “flesh” (soft tissue).

11 As Robert A.J. Gagnon notes, “The image presented in Gen 2,21–22 appears to be that of an originally binary human, or one sexually undifferentiated, who is split down the side to form two sexually differentiated counterparts. Marriage is pictured as a *reconstitution* of the two constituent parts, male and female, that were the products of the splitting” (“The Old Testament and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of the Case Made by Phyllis Bird,” *ZAW* 117 [2005] 367–394).

12 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 156.

13 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 155.

communion. Each recognises the other as an equal, unlike the animals (2:19–20), and yet irreducibly *other*.<sup>14</sup> “The difference between them encourages the discovery of the spiritual good of mutual recognition, the principle of a communion of love and an invitation to become ‘one flesh’ (v. 24).”<sup>15</sup>

In a scene with nuptial overtones, the Lord orchestrates the encounter between the two, thereby resolving the problem of the initial solitude of the human being (v. 18). The man speaks for the first time, welcoming the Creator’s gift in joy and delight. His exclamation, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” reflects the language of covenant.<sup>16</sup>

The call to institute the marriage covenant is a theme of v. 24 where the speaker brings out the purpose of the difference between man and woman: “this is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife”. The reference to parents is entirely incongruous in this narrative context, and compels the reader to see announced here the ideal path traced for man in general: the woman, led by God, goes towards the man (v. 22), and the man, recognising the gift, goes towards the woman (v. 24), each one leaving the reality they came from to bring about through their mutual “adhesion” that unity (“one flesh”) that will be the beginning of new life, and will become in history a sign of witness to the one fatherhood, the one origin of all things.<sup>17</sup>

As Joseph C. Atkinson notes, “God did not create two principles, the male and female, which were then brought together. Rather there is already an interior ordination of one to the other; one comes from the other and together they form a unity... (*bāsār ’ehād*—one flesh).”<sup>18</sup> The beauty of this spousal union is later celebrated in the Psalms and Wisdom literature, especially the Song of Songs, and in the book of Ruth.<sup>19</sup>

At the conclusion of the account in Genesis 2, the narrator’s remark that their nakedness did not produce shame evokes “the innocence of the beginnings, not yet spoiled by sin.” It also suggests “that the sexual relationship of the spouses is pure insofar as in the flesh it expresses love according to the design of God.”<sup>20</sup> This final verse sets up a contrast with the next scene, in which the couple cover themselves and hide in shame in consequence of their disobedience to the divine command (3:7–11). Disobedience to God introduces disorder into human relationships, especially in the sexual sphere.<sup>21</sup>

14 See Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations*, 57–58.

15 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 153.

16 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 158 (cf. Gen 29:14; Judg 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1–3; 19:13–14). See W. Brueggemann, “Of the Same Flesh and Bone (GN 2,23a),” *CBQ* 32 (1970) 532–542.

17 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 157.

18 Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations*, 171.

19 See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 158–170, which also comments briefly on Ps 45; Prov 5:15–18; 31:11–12, 28–29; Sir 7:22; 25:1; 26:13–18; Qoh 4:9–12; 9:7–9; Wis 8:2, 9, 16.

20 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 157.

21 Not incidentally, the first consequence of the couple’s sin is a loss of sexual innocence: “they knew they were naked” (3:7), and there will henceforth be a disturbance in the marital relationship, with tendencies toward disunity, exploitation and dominance (3:12, 16).

The PBC's reflections on the vision of marriage sketched in Genesis 1–2 thus reaffirms the biblical witness that human beings are created with an intrinsic orientation to spousal communion with the opposite sex that is inscribed in the human body, male or female. Marriage and sexuality, as part of God's created order, cannot be arbitrarily defined but have "a constitutive nature which needs to be respected if man and society are to flourish."<sup>22</sup> This background provides the essential foundation for interpreting the biblical passages that directly concern homosexual acts and other behaviours that are contrary to the divine plan for human sexuality.

## 2. The Biblical Texts on Homosexuality: Preliminary Observations

Before proceeding to analyse the biblical texts that mention homosexual acts, the PCB document acknowledges the sensitivity of this topic in today's cultural context, in which many people hold "that a new and more adequate understanding of the human person radically questions the exclusive evaluation of the heterosexual union, and invites similar acceptance of homosexuality and of homosexual unions."<sup>23</sup> Just as the advance of science has shown certain aspects of biblical cosmology, biology and sociology to be outdated and historically conditioned, so, some argue, modern developments in the understanding of sexuality have rendered the biblical view of sexuality antiquated and irrelevant. Moreover, "it is sometimes argued that the Bible says little or nothing on this type of erotic relationship, which should not therefore be condemned, also because it is often wrongly confused with other deviant sexual behaviours."<sup>24</sup> The PBC document does not—contrary to some media reports—endorse these arguments, but simply presents them as a reason for carefully examining the relevant biblical texts.

*What Is Man?* makes another preliminary observation that is of capital importance for interpreting the references to homosexuality: "the Bible does not speak of the erotic

<sup>22</sup> Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 185. For representatives of these views see, e.g., J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1980); R. Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality. Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress 1983); M. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World. A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1998); D. Balch (ed.), *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2000); D.A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Estancia, NM: Alamo Square 2000); K. Stone, "Homosexuality and the Bible or Queer Reading? A Response to Marti Nissinen," *T&S* 14 (2001) 107–181; D.O. Via, "The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality," D.O. Via – R.A.J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible. Two Views* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2003) 1–39; J.V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2013); and W. Loader, "Homosexuality and the Bible," W. Loader et al., *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2016) 17–48.

<sup>24</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 185.

inclination towards a person of the same sex, but only of homosexual acts.”<sup>25</sup> The Bible does not, of course, view the human person in terms of the modern categories of homosexual vs. heterosexual (nor any other sexual orientation); still less does it speak of gender identity as something distinct from sexual difference.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Homosexuality in the Old Testament

Having briefly laid this contextual foundation, the PBC document deals with the four Old Testament and three New Testament texts that directly mention homosexual acts.<sup>27</sup> First are two Old Testament narratives, the stories of the sin of Sodom (Gen 19) and the gang rape in Gibeah (Judg 19). The Sodom account is the proverbial biblical text concerning homosexual sin and its catastrophic punishment. In this story, two angels under the appearance of two men are lodging overnight with Lot, when the inhabitants of Sodom besiege the house, demanding to “know” (יָדַע) these men (Gen 19:5), a euphemism for sexual relations (cf. Gen 4:1, 17, 25). Lot, in a desperate attempt to deter them, offers them instead his two daughters “who have not known [יָדַע] any man” (v. 8), an offer the townsmen refuse. The angels rescue Lot and his daughters, after which the city is destroyed. The PBC notes that Genesis presents the Sodom episode as a counterpoint to the story of Abraham: whereas God’s blessing of Abraham is expressed in “deliverance from every threat and danger, and above all in the gift of innumerable descendants (Gen 15:5; 17:4–5; 22:17),” the curse of Sodom is expressed in “the total disappearance of life, leading to desolation and perpetual sterility.”<sup>28</sup>

But what precisely is the sin for which Sodom is punished? The PBC, along with many contemporary scholars, interprets the sin of Sodom as that of refusing hospitality to strangers and subjecting them to shameful humiliation.<sup>29</sup> It notes that the later references to the Sodom event in the Hebrew Bible do not denounce the city for homosexual

25 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 185. This observation should, however, be balanced by noting the fact that Old and New Testament texts also censure interior lustful passions, whether toward persons of the same or the opposite sex (e.g., Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21; Matt 5:28; Rom 1:26–27; Eph 4:22; 1 Thess 4:5; 2 Pet 2:10).

26 The term “homosexual” is a modern term, coined in Germany in 1869. It was sometimes used more broadly to refer to any single-sex entity (such as an all-girls school), but gradually came to be used specifically in reference to sexual attraction and behaviour. Only in the late twentieth century did “homosexual” come to be viewed as an anthropological category (along with heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and so on) designating a kind of person, namely one with a sexual “orientation” to the same sex. See J.N. Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2005).

27 The document does not treat the biblical texts referring to homosexual cult prostitution (Deut 23:17–18; 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7; Job 36:13–14), nor the story of Ham’s sin against Noah (Gen 9:20–27), which is arguably an act of incestuous homosexual rape (see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 63–71; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 52–53).

28 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 186.

29 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 187.



acts, but rather for a variety of sins including adultery, deceit, encouraging evildoers, pride, complacency, and failure to assist the poor (Isa 1:10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:49–50).<sup>30</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Sodom narrative cannot be read in isolation from its context within the Pentateuch, which condemns homosexual practice as one of the abhorrent behaviours of the Canaanites (Lev 18:22, 24; 20:13, 23). Moreover, two references to Sodom in the later New Testament letters (2 Pet 2:6–10 and Jude 7) interpret the sin of Sodom as erotic relations with persons of the same sex, a fact of importance to canonical biblical interpretation and to later Christian tradition.<sup>31</sup>

The PBC document concludes, however, that the interpretation given in 2 Peter and Jude lacks “clear support in the biblical account.”<sup>32</sup> As evidence for this conclusion, the document states that Genesis does not intend to present “an image of an entire city dominated by overwhelming cravings of a homosexual nature,” which would presumably be unrealistic.<sup>33</sup> But it may be asked whether this observation overstates the case. The narrator’s statement that “the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man” demanded Lot’s guests (Gen 19:4) is standard biblical hyperbole, not intended to be taken literally but used for emphasizing the general wickedness of the city (cf. similar examples in Josh 10:40; Judg 20:26). Moreover, as noted above, the Old Testament does not speak of homosexual inclinations per se, but only of homosexual acts.<sup>34</sup> The narrator of Genesis is concerned not so much with inner cravings as with intended external deeds.

The motif of hospitality is clearly a major element of the Sodom account: the people of Sodom wished to humiliate foreigners rather than welcoming them with respect.<sup>35</sup> When Lot, himself a foreigner, welcomed the angelic guests “under the shelter of his roof,” he was threatened by the men of the city with the same degrading treatment (Gen 19:9). According to the PBC, their threat “reveals the moral evil of the city of Sodom, which not only refuses hospitality, but will not put up with the presence within the city of one who provides an open house to the stranger.”<sup>36</sup> This description, while accurate as far as it goes, omits to mention the full reason given by the men of Sodom for their rancour toward Lot: his condemnation of their intended homosexual rape as “doing evil [רעע]” (Gen 19:7). They retort

<sup>30</sup> See also Sir 16:8; Wis 19:13–14. However, Ezek 16:50 speaks of Sodom having committed “a hateful thing” (תועבה), which is likely an oblique reference to homosexual relations, using the same expression for such acts found in Lev 18:22; 20:13. See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 79–85.

<sup>31</sup> This was the standard interpretation of the sin of Sodom in Jewish literature of the intertestamental and NT period. See Philo, *Abr* 135; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.11.3; *Jub.* 16:5–6; 20:5–6; *T. Levi* 14:6; *T. Benj.* 9.1; *T. Naph.* 3.4; *2 En.* 34:1–2. Jude 7 literally reads, “Sodom and Gomorrah... indulged in sexual immorality and went after other flesh” (Σδόμα καὶ Γόμορρα... ἐκπορνέυσαν καὶ ἀπελθούσαι ἐπίσω σαρκὸς ἑτέρας). The sense may be that “in their lust for sexual intercourse with other men, the men of Sodom inadvertently put themselves in the sacrilegious position of pursuing sexual intercourse with angels” (Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 88).

<sup>32</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 186.

<sup>33</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 187.

<sup>34</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 185.

<sup>35</sup> See K.A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (NAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman 2005) 231–233; Sarna, *Genesis*, 135; G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Dallas, TX: Word Books 1994) 63–65.

<sup>36</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 187.

in outrage, “This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge [וישפט שפוט]! Now we will deal worse [רעע] with you than with them” (Gen 19:9). Their fury is directed at his moral censure of their actions.

Reading the Sodom narrative in its literary context yields further conclusions. The story is part of a tightly-woven unit, which begins with the Lord’s visit to Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre, promising the birth of their son (18:1–15), and concludes with Lot’s incestuous relations with his daughters (19:30–38). The Sodom episode is thus framed by contrasting references to sexual relations. The first, that of Abraham and Sarah, depicts a married couple who trust in God and conform to his plan, leading to great blessing in the birth of their son Isaac, progenitor of the people of Israel. The other, that of Lot and his daughters, depicts distrust in God (cf. 19:31) and disorder in sexual relationships, leading to future troubles in the birth of Ammon and Moab, ancestors of Israel’s historic enemies. This narrative frame suggests that sexuality also plays a key role in the Sodom story itself (18:16–19:29). Another suggestive parallel is that both the Mamre and Sodom scenes involve a divine visitation. In the first, the Lord (in the form of three men/angels) is welcomed by Abraham with extraordinary humility and hospitality; in the second, the Lord (represented by two angels) is treated by the men of Sodom with extraordinary contempt and hostility.<sup>37</sup> This parallel suggests that the fundamental question in both stories is how human beings will respond to a visitation of God.<sup>38</sup> In the eyes of the biblical narrator, the sin of Sodom consists neither in hostility to foreigners alone nor in sexual immorality alone. Rather, it consists of a depraved mélange of homosexual sex, violence toward strangers, and contempt for the messengers of the Lord.

The account in Judges 19 closely parallels the Sodom story. The inhabitants of Gibeah besiege the house of an old man, demanding to “know” a Levite of Ephraim who is lodging overnight with him, i.e., to have coercive homosexual relations with the foreigner (Judg 19:22). The master of the house, attempting like Lot to appease the mob, offers his own virgin daughter and the guest’s concubine in place of “this outrageous thing [גבלה]” (Judg 19:24; cf. 2 Sam 13:12). When they refuse the offer, the Levite hands over his concubine, whom they sexually abuse with such violence that she dies.<sup>39</sup> In this case, as in the Sodom episode, the PBC argues that the sin of the city is that of showing hostility and

37 There are similar parallels between the Sodom episode and the account of the flood (Gen 6–8). In each case there is catastrophic destruction as a result of grave evil, the evil includes both sexual immorality and violence, God mercifully spares one man and his family, and the calamity is followed by the protagonist’s intoxication with wine and the abhorrent actions of his children. See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 40–45.

38 The latter is the focus of Jesus’ own references to Sodom in the synoptic gospels (Matt 10:14–15; 11:20–24; Luke 10:10–12).

39 It is worth noting that, contra the opinion of some interpreters, the narrator—depicting a society in which “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6)—does not condone the behaviour of the old man and the Levite. “They emerge as cowardly, and their complicity in the rape and murder of the woman is a clear and reprehensible violation of covenant” (S. Niditch, *Judges. A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2008] 193). “The text blames the men: the men of Gibeah, the Levite and the host. The woman is a victim of evil men. Good, godly men treat women differently—even in a patriarchal world” (K.L. Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2002] 362).



violence to the stranger. Their sexual abuse of a woman “shows that they were not sexually attracted by the male but only desirous of imposing themselves on the foreigner.”<sup>40</sup> This assumes, however, that only those with exclusively homosexual inclinations would have engaged in homosexual acts—an assumption not supported by the evidence in the Hebrew Bible, nor in ancient Near Eastern literature generally.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, as noted above, the OT is not concerned with sexual inclinations but with sexual acts. Whether the intended rape was motivated by lust or by hostility—or more realistically, a combination of the two—it is the act that is censured. “A strict either/or approach to the question of motivation (intent to do harm vs. sexual passion) is unwarranted for this story.... As in the case of the Yahwist’s rendition of the story Sodom, the narrator here is concerned with describing evil actions, not with psychologizing the motives of the perpetrators of this vile act.”<sup>42</sup> Hostility to a foreigner is certainly an aspect of their despicable behaviour. But here too, a factor that the PBC does not fully account for is that the old man of Gibeah (like Lot) clearly regarded the homosexual nature of the intended acts as exacerbating the crime; for the narrator of the story, this “outrageous thing” (גְּבוּלָה) “was an act that underscored the perversion of the Israelite men of Gibeah.”<sup>43</sup>

After briefly analysing these two narratives, the PBC concludes that the narrative texts of the Bible do not provide “any pointers concerning homosexual practices, either as behaviour to be criticised or as attitudes that are tolerated or welcomed.”<sup>44</sup> This again seems to overstate the case, since in both accounts the homosexual nature of the intended acts forms part of the overall portrait of the depraved city. Nevertheless, it is true that the Sodom and Gibeah narratives—like all biblical narratives—do not in themselves provide norms of conduct. The biblical narratives depict human motives and behaviour in all their complexity—good, evil, and mixed—offering moral assessments only in oblique and sometimes ambiguous ways. For prescriptive moral norms we must look elsewhere. In regard to homosexual acts, these are found in the Old Testament in two legislative texts, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

As the PBC document observes, each of these texts appears in a list of unacceptable sexual practices, including various forms of incest, sexual relations with a menstruating

40 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 188.

41 See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 385, 418–420; D.M. Halperin, “Homosexuality,” *OCD* 723.

42 Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 97.

43 Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 95. It is undoubtedly also true that the woman’s life was considered of less value than that of her husband.

44 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 188. Other OT narratives, such as the account of the friendship between David and Jonathan, or between Ruth and Naomi, are sometimes cited as evidence of a positive view of homosexual relations. But as the PBC notes (*ibidem*, 188), “Friendship between persons of the same sex, such as that of David and Jonathan, which is highlighted in 2 Sam 1:26, cannot be considered as an element favouring the recognition of homosexuality in Israelite society.” See M. Zehnder, “Observations on the Relationship between David and Jonathan and the Debate on Homosexuality,” *WTJ* 69 (2007) 127–174; I. Himbaza – A. Schenker – J.-B. Edart, *The Bible on the Question of Homosexuality* (trans. B.M. Guevin) (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 2011).

woman, adultery, child sacrifice, and bestiality.<sup>45</sup> The PBC, without attempting a detailed analysis of these passages, states that “we can assume that the law of Leviticus intends to safeguard and promote an exercise of sexuality open to procreation, in accordance with the Creator’s command to human beings (Gen 1:28), ensuring of course that such an act takes place within a legitimate marriage.”<sup>46</sup> One might also add that Leviticus intends to safeguard God’s intention for marriage as depicted in the second creation account (Gen 2), where the focus is not on procreation, but on spousal communion.

#### 4. Homosexuality in the New Testament

From the Church’s perspective, it is of course the New Testament that is decisive for formulating Christian moral norms. As the PBC states, the gospels make no mention of homosexual acts.<sup>47</sup> That silence, however, must be interpreted within the context of first-century Judaism, which unequivocally held to the Mosaic law’s prohibitions of homosexual acts along with other sexual offenses.<sup>48</sup> The gospels use the term *πορνεία* (or the singular *πορνεία*) to denote “sexually immoral acts” in general, including those listed in Leviticus 18.<sup>49</sup> A saying of Jesus mentions *πορνεία* as among those “evils” that come from within and “defile a person” (Mark 7:21–23; Matt 15:19–20). Jesus therefore implicitly includes homosexual acts among behaviours that must be renounced by the children of the kingdom. Nor is there any indication that Jesus relaxed the sexual ethics of the Torah. Although he implied that certain ritual laws are now rescinded (Mark 7:14–19; cf. Acts 15; Rom 14:14, 20), his moral teaching was not less but *more* rigorous than that of the Torah and its first-century Jewish

45 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 190. The proscription of sex with a menstruating woman (Lev 18:19; 20:18), dealing as it does with a bodily emission of fluid, would seem belong to the ritual law rather than moral law. But in fact it embodies a moral principle, namely, that even within marriage, male sexual desire is not given free rein but is subject to restraint, in accord with God’s command for openness to procreation (Gen 1:28). See W.C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1991) 199. Likewise, the condemnation of child sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 20:2–5) may appear out of place in a list of sexual behaviours, but in the eyes of the biblical legislator, to destroy the human life resulting from sexual union is in fact a grave abuse of the sexual faculty.

46 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 190.

47 Allusions to homosexuality are sometimes read into gospel texts; for instance, a sexualised interpretation is given to the centurion’s relationship with his slave, or to Jesus’ relationship with the beloved disciple (Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10; John 13:23–25). But this is eisegesis rather than exegesis. See Himbaza – Schenker – Edart, *Question of Homosexuality*, 107–110. Likewise Jesus’ saying about some eunuchs “who have been so from birth” (Matt 19:12) refers to sexual potency, not sexual orientation. See Loader, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” 33.

48 There is abundant evidence that Jews of the period (roughly 200 BC to 200 AD) viewed homosexual practice as an offense and a prime example of pagan sexual depravity. Cf. Wis 14:26; *Let. Aris.* 152; *Sib. Or.* 3:184–187, 596–600, 764; 5:166, 430; *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* 190–192, 212–214; Philo, *Abr.* 135–137; *Spec.* 1.325, 2.50, 3.37–42; *Contempl.* 59–62; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.200–201; *Ag. Ap.* 2.199, 273–275; *T. Levi* 17:11; *T. Naph.* 3:4; 2 *En.* 10:4; 34:1–2; *m. Sanh.* 7:4.

49 Matt 5:32; 15:19; 19:9; Mark 7:21; John 8:41; cf. Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25. See BDAG, s.v. “πορνεία,” 854; Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 191.

interpretation, particularly in the area of sexual ethics (Matt 5:17–19, 27–28, 31–32). In his response to the Pharisees regarding divorce and remarriage (Matt 19:1–9; Mark 10:1–12), Jesus cites both creation accounts (Gen 1:27; 2:24), reaffirming heterosexual marriage as the only kind of sexual union authorized by God. Moreover, by appealing to what God intended “from the beginning of creation” as the standard for marriage henceforth (Mark 10:6), Jesus implies that there is a new capacity to live according to that standard in the eschatological era inaugurated by his redemptive mission.<sup>50</sup>

Three New Testament texts mention homosexual acts explicitly, all in the Pauline correspondence: two in lists of behaviours that exclude a person from inheriting the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:10), and one more detailed text in Romans. The PBC document addresses each of these in turn.<sup>51</sup>

The list in 1 Cor 6:9–10 is prefaced with the rhetorical question “Do you not know?”, indicating that Paul considers these truths self-evident to his Christian audience. He presents a list of ten transgressions in two parts, “almost a kind of Decalogue, adapted for the Corinthian situation.”<sup>52</sup> The first part (v. 9) refers mainly to sexual sins but also includes idolatry, which for Paul, as for the Old Testament, is inextricably linked to sexual immorality.<sup>53</sup> The fourth and fifth items on the list are *μαλακοὶ* (literally, “soft, effeminate”) and *ἄρσενικοῖται* (literally, “men who lie with males”). In ancient Greek *μαλακοὶ* was sometimes used as a pejorative term for men or boys who played the passive role in homosexual acts.<sup>54</sup> Here, sandwiched between two other kinds of sexual behaviour that exclude one from the kingdom (adultery and homosexual practice), it clearly refers not to a mere personality characteristic (effeminacy) but to sexual conduct.<sup>55</sup> Nor is there warrant for narrowing the meaning to “male prostitutes” (NRSV) or “boy prostitutes” (NAB), since there is no evidence that the term was restricted either to adolescents or to those who sold their sexual services.<sup>56</sup> The term *ἄρσενικοῖται* does not appear in Greek prior to Paul and was probably coined by Paul himself, combining the two words used for homosexual acts in

<sup>50</sup> See John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* [*The Splendor of Truth*] (Rome 1993) no. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 191–195.

<sup>52</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 191.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Exod 32:1–6; Num 25:1–2; Isa 57:7–8, Hos 4:12–14; Gal 5:19–21, Eph 5:5, Col 3:5.

<sup>54</sup> Dionysius Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 7.2.4, relates that Aristodemus the tyrant of Cumae was nicknamed *Malakos*, either “because when a boy he was effeminate [*malakos*] and allowed himself to be treated as a woman” or “because he was of a mild nature and slow to anger.” Cf. Philo’s use of *malakia* (“effeminacy”) alongside *anandria* (“unmanliness”) to refer to the behaviour of passive homosexual partners who cultivate feminine features in *Spec.* 3.37–42, and his use of *malakotēs* (“softness, decadence”) to describe the feminizing process of the men of Sodom in *Abr.* 135–137.

<sup>55</sup> G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1987) 244.

<sup>56</sup> Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 306–312, 325–330. Although pederasty was the most common form of male homosexual practice in the Greco-Roman world, it was not uncommon for youths in such relationships to continue to play the sexually passive role in adulthood. See T.K. Hubbard (ed.), *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome. A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2003) 5–7.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 LXX: ἄρσην (“male”) and κοίτη (“lying” or “bed”).<sup>57</sup> Placed together, μαλακοὶ and ἀρσενοκοῖται make clear that both partners in homosexual relations are held accountable.<sup>58</sup> Paul’s aim in this passage is of course to ensure that his readers will *not* be excluded from the kingdom. Thus he calls those who practice such things to repentance and sexual purity in accord with the gift of sanctification they have been given in Christ through the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 1:2; Rom 6:19; 1 Thess 4:3).

In 1 Timothy 1:9–10 there is a long list of the kinds of offenders for whom “the law is laid down,” roughly following the order of the Decalogue. The “law” almost certainly refers to the Mosaic law or Jewish law more broadly, rather than to civil law or the general moral law.<sup>59</sup> Here too the list is prefaced with “knowing this” (similar to “do you not know?” in 1 Cor 6:9), indicating that these truths are considered obvious. This catalogue includes ἀρσενοκοῖται (“men who lie with males”), again referring to those who practice any form of homosexual intercourse, not only exploitative relations with boy prostitutes or one’s own feminized male slaves.<sup>60</sup> As the PBC states unambiguously, “From these lists we can conclude that for Christians homosexual practice is considered a serious sin.”<sup>61</sup>

The most detailed and carefully constructed passage in which homosexual acts are mentioned is the opening section of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Here Paul sketches the universal captivity of human beings to sin, demonstrating the universal need for salvation in Christ. Paul denounces the human tendency to suppress the truth about God (v. 18), which leads to moral degradation in four stages. The PBC speaks of three stages, but Paul’s threefold repetition of the key phrase “[Therefore] God handed them over” (vv. 24, 26, 28) seems to indicate that following the initial stage of rejection of the truth, there are a further three distinct stages.

First, the culpable failure to acknowledge and honour God leads to idolatry (vv. 21–23). “Here is denounced the fact that human beings, although having the reality of creation before their eyes and having the intelligence to understand, were not able to distinguish the creature from the Creator. Instead of rendering glory to God, they venerated ‘the likeness of the image’ of men and of beasts (Rom 1:20–25).”<sup>62</sup>

Second, people commit sexually impure acts that “dishonour [ἀτιμάζεσθαι] their bodies” (vv. 24–25). Paul is likely referring here to sexual immorality in general. These *dishonourable* actions are a direct consequence of the failure to *honour* God by glorifying him (v. 21).

57 Lev 18:22 LXX reads μετὰ ἀρσενος οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ κοίτην γυναικείαν (“you shall not sleep with a male as on the bed of a woman”); Lev 20:13 reads ὅς ἂν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ ἀρσενος κοίτην γυναικός... (“whoever sleeps with a male as on the bed of a woman...”). See D.F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of *Arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10),” *VC* 38 (1984) 125–153.

58 See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 330; D.E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2003) 217–218.

59 See W.D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville TN: Nelson 2000) 32–33.

60 Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 332–336.

61 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 192.

62 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 194.

Third, people engage in homosexual relations (vv. 26–27), which is again directly linked to their rejection of God: those who “exchanged” (ἡλλάξαν) God’s glory for idolatry (v. 23) and “exchanged” (μετήλλαξαν) the truth about God for a lie (v. 25) also “exchanged” (μετήλλαξαν) natural sexual relations for unnatural (v. 26).<sup>63</sup> As the PBC notes, Paul’s term “unnatural” (παρὰ φύσιν) “is to be interpreted as something that contrasts with the concrete reality of sexual bodies, which have in themselves a difference and a purpose that are not recognised and respected in relationships between persons of the same sex.”<sup>64</sup> The claim is often made that the phenomenon of homosexual orientation was unknown to Paul, and therefore here he speaks only against those who are heterosexual by nature but engage in homosexual acts.<sup>65</sup> But the phenomenon of an exclusive or predominant attraction to the same sex was in fact well known in the ancient Greco-Roman world and likely familiar to Paul.<sup>66</sup> More importantly, there is no evidence that Paul would have understood what is “natural” as constituted by a person’s subjective desires or inclinations. Otherwise one would have to recognize a “natural” orientation to other forms of sexual sin—not to mention envy, deceit, boasting, and other sins mentioned in this passage (vv. 29–31). Rather, “natural” means living in harmony with the order of things willed by the Creator.<sup>67</sup> Paul describes the sexual acts that violate that order as marked by “dishonour” (ἀτιμία) and “disgrace” (ἀσχημοσύνη). The PBC makes the important observation that for Paul, such behaviour is itself “a form of punishment: ‘God abandoned them to degrading passions [...] receiving in themselves due reward for their perversion’ (Rom 1:26–27).”<sup>68</sup> Sexual conduct that no longer respects the “natural” sexual complementarity of men and women is thus not prior to but rather a *symptom* of the sin of rejecting the truth about God.

Finally, Paul describes a general breakdown of society in the form of various violent and disordered behaviours (vv. 28–31). This too he interprets as a divine judgment that is meant to “open people’s eyes to the lie that produced such injustice,” so that they may recognise their need for the solution God has provided: “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24).<sup>69</sup>

63 By using the relatively rare terms θήλυς (female) and ἄρσεν (male) rather than γυνή (woman) and ἀνὴρ (man) in vv. 26–27, Paul alludes to Gen 1:27 LXX, emphasizing the sexual distinctiveness of male and female in God’s created order. See T.R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book 1998) 95.

64 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 194.

65 Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109–112; Via, “The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality,” 15; Loader, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” 45.

66 See Plato, *Symp.* 189C–193D; Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 7.5.3–5 and other sources cited in Gagnon, *Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 380–386.

67 See Loader, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” 39–40; J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday 1993) 286; Schreiner, *Romans*, 95. Philo, *Spec.* 3.7; cf. *Abr.* 26, and Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.38, specifically denounce homosexual practice as “unnatural” (παρὰ φύσιν).

68 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 194. See Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 272.

69 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 194.

## Conclusion

In concluding its brief treatment of the biblical texts concerning homosexuality, the PBC states that “Certain formulations of biblical authors, as well as the disciplinary directives of Leviticus, require an intelligent interpretation that both safeguards the values that the sacred text seeks to promote and avoids the literal repetition of culturally conditioned features of the time.” Moreover, “pastoral care will be required, particularly in relation to individuals, in order to carry out that service of the good that the Church is called to take up in its mission to humanity.”<sup>70</sup> Although these statements caused consternation in some circles, a recognition of the cultural conditioning of biblical texts is well established in Catholic teaching. As the Catechism states, “In order to discover the sacred authors’ intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture.”<sup>71</sup> Today there is a greater recognition than there was in ancient times that certain sexual behaviours are often not simply chosen but can stem from inner wounds and compulsions that are difficult to resist.<sup>72</sup> An adequate pastoral approach to sexual morality must take into account factors that were not considered by the biblical authors; for instance, the fact that some people have, through no fault of their own, deep-seated homosexual inclinations going back to early childhood, which can diminish—though without entirely destroying (cf. 1 Cor 10:13)—their freedom to resist these impulses. Likewise, sexual abuse (homosexual or heterosexual) often causes profound psychological trauma that destroys self-esteem and leads people into sexually promiscuous lifestyles. None of these factors nullifies the biblical teachings on sexual morality, but they do need to inform the Church’s pastoral approach to the issue, which should be marked by the New Testament’s confidence in the power of Christ’s grace: “such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Thus the treatment of homosexuality in the PBC document, while incomplete in some respects, in no way seeks to change or invalidate the Church’s teaching, but simply provides a concise orientation to the relevant biblical texts and important facts to consider in interpreting them.

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<sup>70</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *What Is Man?*, no. 195.

<sup>71</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2 ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2011) no. 110; cf. Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* (Rome 1965) no. 12; Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu* (Rome 1943) no. 37–42; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome 1993) I.A; I.D; III.D.

<sup>72</sup> For very helpful explanations of and pastoral responses to such challenges, see the essays in J.E. Smith – P. Check (eds.), *Living the Truth in Love. Pastoral Approaches to Same-Sex Attraction* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius 2015).



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