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## Is It So Bad to Be Yourself?

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May 2020

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Andrew S. Russell entitled “Is It So Bad To Be Yourself?” We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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IS IT SO BAD TO BE YOURSELF?

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty  
Of the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Of  
Master of Arts  
In History  
Winthrop University

May 2020

By

Andrew S. Russell

### **Abstract**

Homosexuality has been a topic of recent controversial religious discourse, not only in America, but also world-wide. This begs the question: when did homosexuality become such a divisive issue in religious circles? The purpose of this thesis is to examine how ancient western cultures perceived homosexuality and treated homosexuals. Starting with the pagan civilizations of Greece and Rome, and then looking at how homosexuality was perceived in the ancient Judaic world and into the early Christian community, it seems that homosexuality only gradually became stigmatized as early Christians sought to distinguish themselves as unique in the ancient world.

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## Introduction

“Have thy way, I am the love that dare not speak its name”  
-- Lord Alfred Douglas, *Two Loves*

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Today, human sexuality as we know it today spans a complete spectrum, from being sexually attracted to only members of the same sex, to only being attracted to members of the opposite sex, and everything in between. Robert A. Nye argues that our modern concept of sexuality only came into existence in the nineteenth century. It was only during the Industrial Revolution that states in the West “took a keen interest in the health and well-being of populations that were steadily more numerous, more urban, and more ‘dangerous’ to public order.”<sup>1</sup> Nye notes that the rise of scientific and medical information began to break the grip of the religious beliefs that had governed sexual behavior for thousands of years. It was during this time that medical doctors started to define the idea of “sexuality” as a part of one’s individual identity. This spectrum is both similar and different than the historic views on homosexuality prior to the rise of Christianity.

And yet, there has been a reaction to new ideas about gender in the modern world, and the rhetoric is not always pleasant. On June 2, 2019, Grayson Fritts, a pastor at All Scripture Baptist Church in Knoxville, TN, delivered an anti-LGBTQ<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Nye, “The Discovery of ‘Sexuality’ at the Turn of the Century,” in *Sexuality*, ed. Robert A. Nye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 113.

<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ refers to the community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community, and is the current preferred method of referring to those who had previously been called “homosexuals.” In some cases, the acronym contains a “+” at the end to refer to pansexual, gender queer, bigendered, gender variant, and pangender people.

sermon in which he told his congregation, “Put homos to death.”<sup>3</sup> This type of thinking is rampant in Fundamental Christian sects; the Westboro Baptist Church is infamous for protesting at military servicemembers’ funerals with anti-LGBTQ signs. Even outside of Western culture in the modern world, being a part of the LGBTQ community can mean imprisonment or even death. On June 11, 2019, the African nation of Botswana decriminalized homosexuality, making it the twentieth nation in Africa to make homosexuality legal. In contrast, in thirty-five African nations, homosexuality is illegal, and in four nations, it is a capital crime.<sup>4</sup> Erick Laurent points out that in Asian countries, a combination of religion and ingrained cultural emphasis on familial and social harmony complicate LGBTQ issues.<sup>5</sup>

The aforementioned events have led to what might be perceived as a societal shift away from the homophobic views that were prevalent prior to the twentieth century. Society is perhaps moving toward a more open and accepting culture that includes those of variant sexual persuasions. And yet, it seems that much of the rhetoric reflects Western cultural values and is sometimes connected with the Church. Can Nye be correct that this is all a response to recent understandings of human sexuality and gender? The purpose of this thesis is to look at how ancient western cultures perceived homosexuality and treated homosexuals. Starting with the pagan

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<sup>3</sup> Callum Patton, “Put Homos to Death: Sheriff’s Deputy Says LGBT ‘Freaks’ and ‘Animals’ Should be Executed in Tennessee Sermon,” *Newsweek*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/put-homos-death-sheriffs-deputy-says-lgbt-freaks-animals-should-executed-tennessee-1443783>.

<sup>4</sup> As of May 31, 2018, this information is correct, according to Amnesty International UK’s website on LGBTI Rights, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/lgbti-lgbt-gay-human-rights-law-africa-uganda-kenya-nigeria-cameroon>.

<sup>5</sup> Erick Laurent, “Sexuality and Human Rights: An Asian Perspective,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 48, no. 3-4 (2005): 163-225, doi:10.1300/J082v48n03\_09.

Greeks and Romans, and then exploring views of homosexuality in Judaic culture as well as within the early Christian community, it seems that these modern shifts in rhetoric towards a more accepting society may, in fact, be a return to form rather than a modern cultural advancement or progressive achievement. That is, looking at ancient views about homosexuality, it seems that the Greeks and the Romans were less concerned about the gender of a couple, and instead focused on maintaining social status and who among the partners was dominant during the act of sex. It did not really matter if the couple were two men, two women, or the more traditional man and woman. Similarly, same sex couples or those who were affectionate toward others of the same sex were not condemned in ancient Jewish culture. The issue was the sex act itself, not the participants involved. It was homosexual sex that could be punished by death, but this was rare. However, in the early Christian community, homosexuality was labelled an abomination. Even people who had homosexual tendencies could be put to death.

Historians have done some in-depth examinations of homosexuality in antiquity. The prevailing theme in today's scholarship on same-sex relationships in Ancient Greece and Rome points to the fact that the idea of sexuality, as we define it today, was not a concept in either culture. Although it is doubtless that sexual preference formed the basis of some same-sex relationships, the majority of the relationships were built on representations of the societal power and gender roles of the day. According to Robert A. Nye's work, *Sexuality*, historically sexuality has been viewed as having a negative influence on society that needs to be curbed for the

society to function properly. However, Nye argues that to understand a society fully, one must also understand the societal context of sexuality. He writes, “the Greeks and Romans organized their erotic to correspond to the gendered distribution of power that prevailed in their societies: property-owning citizens in active sexual roles, women in passive ones, adolescent boys occupying a liminal status of their own.”<sup>6</sup> Nye argues that this concept of sexuality differs from early Christians because instead of organizing sexuality along the societal powers structure, they associated sexual impulses with earthly desires instead of the heavenly. Marilyn B. Skinner furthers Nye’s argument that sexual relationships occurred along the power structure of Ancient Greek and Roman cultures and goes on to point out that neither culture had a word that corresponds to our modern definition of sexuality. In Ancient Greek, the closest approximation to is *ta aphrodisia*, which she translates to “the matters of Aphrodite,” and the Romans had many words for sex acts and organs, there was no encyclopedic term for sexuality.<sup>7</sup>

John Boswell digs deeper into the power structure of same-sex relationships in his book, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. He identifies four types of same-sex relationships: the exploitative relationships between master and slave, and rape of defeated enemies; concubinage, which fulfilled a man’s sexual needs before he married without the risk of offspring that could complicate inheritance and property

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<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Nye, “Introduction,” in *Sexuality*, ed. Robert A. Nye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 3.

issues; and the most common lover's relationship. He wrote that much of the current literature available when he published his book in 1994, “portrays classical homosexual relationships as formal, brief interactions between an older ‘lover’ (ἐραστής) and a ‘beloved’ (ἐρώμενο) who is considerably younger and generally somewhat passive.”<sup>8</sup> However, Boswell argues that this was not necessarily true. Ancient Athenian culture included pederasty, a tradition where an older male would select and groom a youth near ten or twelve years old, which followed this dynamic but there was not always a power inequality between same-sex lovers. David Cohen’s article “Law, Society and Homosexuality in Classical Athens” also casts the myth that same-sex relationships always included a power imbalance. By looking at the Athenian *hubris* law, he determines that Plato’s *Symposium* demonstrates that some homoerotic acts were considered shameful for the younger, passive partner. However, the only laws that governed homoerotic acts outlawed prostitution, which did not fall in the realm of the *hubris* law, and a same-sex relationship in which a slave is the dominant or active partner, and a free-born boy is the submissive or passive partner.<sup>9</sup>

Sexuality in Ancient Rome followed many of the same structures as the Ancient Greek societies that were integral to forming the Roman identity. The primary difference between the two cultures is that the power inequality between sexual partners occurred more along socioeconomic lines than traditional gender roles. For the Romans, according to Skinner, the body of the *vir* (adult male citizen)

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<sup>8</sup> John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), 56-7.

<sup>9</sup> David Cohen, “Law, Society and Homosexuality in Classical Athens,” *Past & Present*, no. 117, (Nov. 1987): 3-21.

“was regarded as inviolable, legally protected from sexual penetration, beating, and torture.”<sup>10</sup> This definition of *vir* that should have given all adult, male citizens bodily autonomy did not apply to every man, but only those of the upper classes. Any man of lower socioeconomic status was automatically rendered effeminate. Because pederasty was a criminal sexual act in Rome, that left slaves, slaves that had been freed but were still expected to deliver part-time assistance to their former masters, and prostitutes as the only acceptable objects of male homoerotic desires. Skinner does note that these conventions did change, as evidenced by the writings of Sallust in the late first century B.C.E. She cites a specific passage in his writing that says men played the woman’s role in sexual relationships, meaning they became the passive or penetrated partner. Amy Richlin disagrees completely with Skinner, citing rampant examples of pederasty in Roman culture, even going so far as to say “adult males normally penetrated both women and boys.”<sup>11</sup> Richlin argues that a passive homosexual subculture existed, but they faced much of the same homophobia that exists today and even faced criminal penalties for free men who allowed themselves to be penetrated. A mere two years later, in his article, “Greek Love at Rome,” Craig A. Williams argues that writers such as Livy and Valerius Maximus prove that homosexual and heterosexual activity coexisted, and had “a disinclination to assign evaluative significance to the difference between homosexual and heterosexual

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<sup>10</sup> Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 195.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Richlin, “Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinadeus and the Roman Law against Love between Men,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4 (April 1993): 530, <https://jstor.org/stable/3704392>.

behavior as such.”<sup>12</sup> Williams goes on to claim that Roman texts do not identify male homosexual behavior as unnatural or a perversion.

Ancient Greece was one of the earliest Western civilizations that documented homosexuality as a part of that culture, and they even documented other forms of sexuality, as well. Much of Greek mythology is embedded with different Greek Gods performing sexual acts with mortal women and men in a variety of guises including loved ones, nonphysical forms, and even animals.<sup>13</sup> These myths clarify that the Ancient Greeks were more fluid and accepting of various peculiarities when it came to the different aspects of a person’s sexual preferences and sexual identity.

Greek acceptance of sexuality was not only seen in the mythology of the gods, but also in heroic myths that were showcased and popular then and now, although modern interpretations usually showcase adapted cultural sensibilities. For example, the famous hero Herakles’s close friend Iolaus was often shown to be Herakles’s *eromenos*, or older male companion linked in a romantic sense, in addition to his best friend.<sup>14</sup> This was adapted to be a more *bromantic* role in modern portrayals, but the closeness of the characters cannot be understated or overlooked in how their culture accepted the premise of a homosexual relationship even while the pair were more traditionally married to women at the time of their relationship.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, Craig A. “Greek Love at Rome.” *The Classical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1995): 517–39.

<sup>13</sup> In Greek Mythology, the Gods would present themselves to mortals in order to have sex with them. Usually the Greek God that would be considered

<sup>14</sup> Edward Carpenter, *Iolaus: An Anthology of Friendship*, (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1908), 23–24.

<sup>15</sup> The term “bromance” is often used to describe a close intimate, yet non-sexual, relationship between two or more heterosexual males.

While reflections on popular culture, which for the Greeks included mythologies and heroic tales, can say a lot about the values of people who lived at the time, looking at common, daily routines and interactions can also be quite telling, and, outside of myth and legend, the most prominent documented aspect of homosexuality or bisexuality can be found in records of the Greek military class. In ancient Greece, young men and trained soldiers within the barracks developed romantic and sexual relationships. Sequestered away from the opposite sex and forced to work in basically intimate conditions for long hours on a daily basis, especially while on campaign, these relationships formed naturally and were not frowned upon as they created bonds among the men and strengthen the fighting spirit that they had for each other. Fighting for loved ones, especially when that target of affection was on the same battlefield, led to the formation of the Sacred Band of Thebes. This group was an elite hoplite unit comprised entirely of pairs of male lovers. The assumption was that a soldier would fight harder with his lover by his side than not.<sup>16</sup>

As the Roman Empire came to dominate the lands around the Mediterranean, homosexuality continued to be accepted as a normal thing, even an everyday occurrence. Roman soldiers had the same kinds of relationships as the Greeks, and homosexuality was not something that was discouraged or frowned upon. Even in everyday life things were more open and sexually ambiguous among the early Romans. Various sources and documents show that the Romans who held slaves or indentured servants often used them in ways that were involved with sexual

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<sup>16</sup> Carpenter, 19-20.

gratification.<sup>17</sup> Though in these circumstances it could be argued that the act of using servants in such a manner had nothing to do with homosexuality or heterosexuality, as servants may have been viewed similarly to a prostitute.<sup>18</sup> This type of behavior was commonly practiced in Roman society.

While homosexuality or bisexuality was largely accepted, or at least was not worthy of comment, in both Greek and early Roman cultures, there were expectations of young men in those cultures. Regardless of the relationship, whether it was a romance between soldiers or emotionally charged, the expectation was that you adults would marry and produce a family in order to carry on their family line. Value was placed on having children and grandchildren to care for family holdings over the accomplishments of one person.

The Romans were accepting of homosexuality so long as it did not undermine a man's ability to have and support a family. In the Senate, homosexuality was often used as a means to slander opponents or to cast their motivations into doubt as Romans felt that necessary family values were foreign to homosexuals, who were not fit to pass laws on such subjects.<sup>19</sup> Slander of this nature could be used to devastating effect, and it would begin to erode the normalized views on homosexuality, as influential Romans would avoid being labelled a homosexual.

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<sup>17</sup> Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Williams quotes an example from Eva Cantarella's book, entitled *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, where Cantarella states "To sum up, Homosexuality in itself was neither a crime nor a socially reprobated form of behavior. Carrying on with a slave (so long as he did not belong to someone else) was accepted as normal behavior, as was paying a male prostitute. The only thing that was not acceptable was to make love to a young free Roman Citizen." (Cantarella, 104).

<sup>19</sup> Suetonius, "The Deified Julius," in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 324-325.

Homosexuality, therefore, was accepted in the Roman Empire, so long as an inclination toward same sex relationships did not affect a man's ability to have a family, but that all changed when Constantine won the Battle of Milvian Bridge. At this battle, Constantine claimed to have a vision and announced that his army would put a Christian symbol on their shields.<sup>20</sup> Constantine won the battle, and Christianity was on its way to being accepted within the Roman Empire. This would be a gradual change, but eventually, as the Christian Church became more organized and accepted, Christian norms became accepted as the norm. One such tenet was the condemnation of perceived sexual deviances including homosexuality and bisexuality.

Unlike the Romans, Christians villainized same-sex relationships, which were considered less pure, and, as the Church grew in power, territory, and influence, these views began to be the norm. As was noted above, the Bible contains negative references to homosexuality. Sexual deviancy was frowned upon, including homosexual or bestial-sexual acts, and thus homosexuals came to be seen as evil.

Homosexuality, therefore, was widely accepted in ancient Greece, quietly tolerated in the Roman Empire prior to Constantine, so long as it did not affect the family, but ended as an abominable practice once the Christian Church came to prominence. In examining this gradual evolution of cultural acceptance of homosexuality in antiquity, it seems that it only became stigmatized when it was perceived to threaten or undermine core cultural values. Perhaps, as this process is

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<sup>20</sup> "Lactantius, Of the Manner in which the Persecutors died," Chapter XLIV, University of Calgary, accessed July 26, 2019, <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/lactant/lactperf.html>.

better understood, the contextualized view of the place homosexuality holds in society can be used to help normalize the concept of it in the current day.

## Chapter 1

### Greece

“You don’t fall in love with the gender. You fall in love with the person.”

-- Anonymous

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Culture and sexuality were intrinsic to ancient Greece belief systems and daily life. The different aspects that were involved with the ideals as well as religious and historical connotations would be seen as something obscene or fringe in many circles in the modern day but were accepted as commonplace among them at the time. These could be things like the tradition of pederasty or of two men sworn to each other in both the common practice and in mythological tales. This is apparent when one views the common practices and religious stories of ancient Greece along with the progression of Grecian civilization and customs up through the empire forged by Alexander the Great. Throughout their religion and societal practices, the Greeks demonstrated a high level of sexuality with many of their divine figures practicing sexual acts of homosexuality, bestiality, and even abduction. Due to their variant sexual beliefs as compared to the modern day the views of Greeks on homosexuality and other sexual practices are deeply tied into these aspects.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Ancient Greeks were primarily polytheistic, meaning that they worshiped many different deities. This is confirmed by reading of the mythology of the culture at the time. A few examples of the deities are Zeus, Hera, Apollo, and Ares, as well as many others. The Greeks had a god, and many times, a goddess of everything from the Earth to the Sea and everything in between. Some of these deities will be mentioned throughout the chapter.

The Grecian religious practices show a deep running theme of both sexual variance and submissive practices of one partner giving dominance to the other, while the gender of the parties is a secondary consideration in many cases; these themes can be seen in various myths surrounding Zeus, Heracles, Hades, and Poseidon. Most of the myths dealing with sexuality and Zeus revolve around the god's amorous and narcissistic attitude and lack of fidelity. Many of these examples involve the partners of Zeus being either unknowing or unwilling, with the use of shape changing, and trickery facilitate the rendezvous between god and mortal.

The myth of Zeus and Leda shows the trickery of the god in action. In this tale Zeus becomes enamored with Leda, wife to King Tyndareus of Sparta, and he decided to seduce her. In order to do so Zeus took the form of a swan and beguiled Leda on a night after she copulated with her husband. This led to a pregnancy that bore four children, two demigods sired by Zeus and two humans sired by Tyndareus. One of the demigod children was named Helen, who would later become known as Helen of Troy.<sup>22</sup>

This leads to a later myth where during a beauty contest among the gods, Aphrodite sought to win by offering Paris, prince of Troy and the selected judge, the most beautiful woman in the world as a bribe for judging in her favor. Zeus' wife, Hera, was also among the goddesses being judged and she was known to have a particularly vindictive streak when dealing with the illegitimate children of her

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<sup>22</sup> Other versions of Helen's story name her as the daughter of the Goddess Nemesis, but this myth complements other, later legendary stories. These later tales make more sense if Zeus was Helen's father.

husband. In this story, partners were unfaithful to their spouses and strange partners, even animals, were seen as completely possible. And yet there were also consequences for this behavior, as Zeus' actions led to the Trojan War.<sup>23</sup>

This myth shows two aspects of Greek sexuality and culture due to its representation of both bestiality and punishment for adultery to an extreme degree. The first is that bestiality is something that could be accepted, though in storytelling form more than reality. It is known that Greeks did not practice any kind of widespread bestiality practices. There simply is no evidence for it. But while gods may be entitled to take actions that would be abhorrent to mortals, it is still seen as divine and as such can be viewed as permission to participate. Even if bestiality was incredibly rare, it was accepted as possible in the story.

There were also ramifications for Zeus' infidelity, but neither he nor Leda had to face them. King Tyndareus of Sparta did nothing to punish his wife in most of the versions of the myth, possibly due to ignorance of her infidelity. Or he realized that the gods were at work and one does not step on the plans or desires of the gods without risking severe punishment. In this case Zeus's adulterous actions went undiscovered by Hera - at least she did not punish him or Leda. Instead, Hera often redirected her ire at the children produced through Zeus' trysts rather than punishing him directly. This shows a submissive side to the queen of the gods, as she would rather attack the defenseless children than confront her adulterous husband, as it was

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<sup>23</sup> Harry Thurston Peck, *Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* (New York: Tufts University, 1898), 930, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.3:1:200.harpers.170603>.

not a wife's place to do so. In other words, this story highlights how the submissive partner in a relationship might act outside of the bedroom. It also demonstrates that while, based on other myths and practices, the gender of those involved may not be a factor, the dominant and submissive roles were very much a large part of relationships.<sup>24</sup>

Another myth that addresses the variant sexual practices of the culture was that of Zeus and Ganymede. In this myth Zeus saw Ganymede, a young shepherd, tending his sheep on a hillside. Ganymede was said to be the most beautiful of youths and as such gained the affection of the king of the gods. Due to his beauty and grace, Zeus desired Ganymede and sought to take him away. Zeus changed into an eagle and kidnapped Ganymede, taking him back to Mount Olympus to be the immortal cupbearer of the gods. Ganymede's father was gifted with divine horses as a form of compensation for the theft of the youth.<sup>25</sup>

In this myth there are clear references to homosexuality and pederasty.<sup>26</sup> However, the homosexual aspect is traditionally played down, as the emphasis is on Ganymede's appearance, which is often described using feminine terms such as beautiful or graceful. The more important aspect of their relationship is that of pederasty, an ancient Greek custom involving the approved abduction of a young boy

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<sup>24</sup> Jennifer R. March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 223, <http://search.ebscohost.com.winthropuniversity.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=810079>.

<sup>25</sup> William A. Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 38-40, <https://archive.org/details/pederastypedagog00perc/page/38>.

<sup>26</sup> The Oxford Dictionary defines pederasty as "Homosexual relations between a man and a boy; homosexual anal intercourse, usually with a boy or younger man as the passive partner."

by an older man for the sake of bonding and sexual gratification. The myth of Zeus and Ganymede follows the abduction practice almost exactly, with the only differences being that Zeus did not seek permission from Ganymede's father prior to the abduction. This would of course be because he was Zeus and thus any compensation for his actions is already the exception and never the rule.<sup>27</sup>



Rembrandt's *The Abduction of Ganymede* 1635, oil on panel, on display Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Dresden in a private collection. Photograph courtesy of <http://www.rembrandt-van-rijn.com/abduction-of-ganymede/>.

To see a more focused aspect of homosexuality in Greek mythology, one need to look no further than Heracles. Heracles was the son of one of Zeus's many affairs,

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<sup>27</sup> Hugh Chisholm, "Ganymede," in *Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature, and General Information* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 454.

this time with the mortal Alcmene. He was a half-brother to the hero Perseus, who was known for slaying Medusa and marrying the demigoddess Andromeda. Heracles was known to be the strongest and most masculine of men, and yet he kept male lovers. This underscores how culturally acceptable things like same sex lovers were in the culture.<sup>28</sup>

The primary male lover of Heracles was Iolus, who assisted Heracles on some of his famous labors. Iolus and Heracles were widely known to share sexual relations, but their relationship was never classified as a romantic one. This is shown by Heracles's multiple marriages and that the two treated their bond as comradeship and friendly rather than dedicated in a romantic way. They were considered to be the best and most loyal of friends and used this strength to overcome many of Heracles's obstacles, which were often placed in his path by Hera or through trickery.

The myths of Heracles clearly show that he had three wives throughout his life despite his friendship with Iolus. The reason Heracles had to perform the Twelve Labors was that he killed his first wife, Megara. The murder was a mistake, as he was drunk and poisoned, which led him to think his wife and children were his enemies. This is a clear path of redemption story arc, but it is pertinent that even as the personification of masculinity, Heracles did not take another wife or female lover until his labors were complete, though Iolus was a predominant figure in the tales. As with the tale of Zeus and Ganymede, in this story one lover is dominant and the other

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<sup>28</sup> William Smith, ed., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, vol. 1 (London: Walton and Maberly, 1864), 393-402.

submissive. Further, the homosexual relationship appears as a stand-in for Heracles' spouse, which was seemingly a more important relationship. Heracles' relationship with Iolus is a good example of how Greeks viewed things like same sex relationships. These were viewed as proximate relationships based on mutual respect rather than romantic or economic relationships. Homosexual relationships were more casual in the way they were presented and never ended in marriage.<sup>29</sup>

Rape was also commonplace in ancient Greece. This can be seen in the story of Heracles' second wife, a woman named Deianira, who would accidentally kill her husband by attempting to use a chemical to prevent him from committing adultery. The tale says that after Heracles rescued her from an attempted rape by the centaur Nessus, the dying centaur convinced her to take his blood as payment. At the time of ancient Greece rape was seen more as a property crime than as a personal attack as women could not even bring a case against their attacker in most courts. It was almost commonplace, and this is why Deianira was compelled to listen to her attacker even as he lay dying. Any clothing soaked in said blood would prevent Heracles from being sexually inclined to other women and thus prevent any form of adultery. But the centaur had lied, and, as vengeance, anyone who wore those bloody clothes would be burned and tormented. When she felt that her husband was beginning to stray from their marriage vows, Deianara prepared a shirt in the aforementioned manner which indeed began to burn Heracles and caused him so much torment that he decided to

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<sup>29</sup> Loukas Papadimitropoulos, "Heracles as Tragic Hero," *Classical Word* 101, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 131-138.

commit suicide via funeral pyre rather than continue to endure the pain.

This myth is less a comment on sexuality and more a focus on rape culture in ancient Greece and also an additional tale where a woman's insecurities lead to unfortunate outcomes. The attempted rape of Deianara by Nessus was quickly foiled by Heracles via bow and envenomed arrow, but as soon as he lay dying the centaur offers payment, even if duplicity was involved. The portrayal of Deianara in this case is not that of a traumatized rape survivor, but more of a person dealing with commonplace issues. Nessus' rape of Deianara was only foiled after Heracles appeared to stop him.

The normalization of rape in Greek mythology could be seen in other myths as well. The most well-known of these would be the myth of Poseidon and Medusa. This tale has undergone several variations from the original to the later retellings that focus more on the rape culture aspect. The original has Medusa as a monster from birth along with her two sisters which exemplifies a much less sympathetic version than what was later adopted.

The later version of the myth details how Medusa was the fairest of maidens in her time. Due to her beauty, she attracted the attention of the sea god Poseidon and he pursued her. Rejecting the god's advances, Medusa sought shelter in the Temple of Athena where Poseidon captured and raped her. But due to this sacrilege occurring in her temple, Athena would blame Medusa for drawing Poseidon there and allowing the act to occur on her sacred ground. Thus, Athena would curse Medusa with hair like serpents and a visage that would turn men to stone.

“Victim blaming,” or in this case blaming Medusa for being raped, was likely commonly assumed among the audiences who heard this tale. But the more important aspect of this particular adaptation is that it was actually not a Grecian version of the story, but one adapted from a later Roman poet. This is shown by other myths that involve rape in Greek mythology. In most other myths, rape is something that is accepted as commonplace; neither party is held to any level of accountability for the crime and unless harm is done to either the inciting man or the woman’s husband, nothing becomes of the act. The Roman version shows the victim being punished for the act despite their attempts to prevent it and thus a clear difference in certain sexual culture is shown between the different mythologies.

Incest was also permissible in ancient Greek myths. In many cases sisters and brothers married, and sons and mothers did, as well. Such was the case of Oedipus, who unknowingly claimed the throne from his father and married his mother. The issue would become more prominent among the Greek nobility, who sought to preserve noble rights through marriages of siblings or other close relatives. Heracles’s last wife was the goddess Hebe, who was also his half-sister through Zeus. She was the goddess of youth and primes of life and was the original cupbearer of the gods, to later be replaced with Ganymede after his abduction. Heracles was granted complete divinity after his mortal body was burned away as a means of showing that the ultimate example of masculinity could only be awarded with the ultimate prize, which was not granted to any of Zeus’s other children.

While there were cultural assumptions about sex and relationships embedded

in myths, what can be said about how Greeks actually did in antiquity? The Grecian sexual culture was one that was very complex, but often seemed to be more open and accepting than the ethical and moral standards of today. In Greek society, some of the major concerns reflect those themes that could be found in their myths and legends, namely the ages of those involved, the roles and acceptance of homosexuality, and the acceptance of rape and male dominance.

In ancient Greece, youths of ages as low as ten years old were fully accepted as adults and able to be sexually active. As was mentioned in the discussion of Zeus and Ganymede, there was an accepted practice of pederasty from near the fifth century BCE where a young boy was courted by an older man. This practice involved the elder male approaching the boy's father and seeking his blessing for the abduction and actions to be taken, often with a sum of wealth given to the father for act. In the case of pederasty, the age of twelve was the target age. This was almost never viewed in the same light as the homosexual relationships that were developed later in life between men.

The same sex relationships that are portrayed in ancient Grecian writings and myths are rarely negative, and they were not, considered in romantic terms. The act of two men developing a sexual relationship was seen as a commonplace occurrence, often born out of necessity. The old cliché about how a man gets lonely applies in this circumstance, as men in the military or those on long journeys, travelers or merchants, would find themselves without female companionship for long periods.

Homosexual relationships did not result in marriages, however. The culture

recognized the covenant of marriage as between a man and a woman, not because of bigoted beliefs, but because that was the accepted means of transferring wealth and influence. It was also how families were created. For the most part, when it came to homosexual relationships, few stories or histories include the viewpoints of a wife and their thoughts on any male lovers their husband had. Again, homosexuality was accepted as a necessity or a convenience rather than a malicious act of adultery. This may be tied to the fact that no child could result from such a union, and thus there would be no contenders to inheritance or influence and thus the acts were accepted as harmless.

While the age of these young boys might appear young due them being only ten to twelve years old, it is similar to that of young girls who were made available for marriage, often to older men. These practices do not include an abduction but rather a fee paid, and other contracts drawn up to increase the wealth and/or standing of both parties, a practice that would long outlive the ancient Greek culture itself. Therefore, both older men would have young male lovers and marry girls of the same age as their lovers, but officially, marriage would only exist between a man and a woman.

Essentially, homosexuality and relationships between older men and children around the age of twelve were considered perfectly acceptable so long as any parties that stood to lose wealth or station were properly compensated. These kinds of views were more pronounced in what could colloquially be known as the “pop culture” of ancient Greece.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are probably the most well-known ancient Greek poems, both then and now, and both show aspects of homosexual culture and how the sanctity of marriage can differ between men and women. The *Iliad* is a long-form epic poem credited to the Grecian storyteller and poet Homer<sup>30</sup>, and it details the events leading up to and of the legendary Trojan War. The poem ends with the fall of Troy and the victory by the Greeks. Homosexuality and gender roles are woven into the story.

The first is that of Helen of Troy herself. As previously mentioned, she was awarded to the prince of Troy, Paris, as a bribe for choosing the goddess of Aphrodite as the most beautiful over the goddesses Hera and Athena and the bribes they offered him as well. Helen was married to King Menelaus of Sparta at the time the contest occurred and so it has always been speculated as to how much of her feelings for Paris were genuine and how much were the machinations of the goddess of love. But due to the adulterous actions of Helen, a war was begun that would be one of the most legendary conflicts in history.

This aspect shows the dual, and often hypocritical, nature of adultery in Grecian culture. When a woman is unsatisfied with her marriage or is lured away romantically then the only course of action left to the husband is to seek return or retribution.

There was also a same sex relationship between the legendary hero Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*. In the Homeric version of the story, the two were close

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<sup>30</sup> This work, though often credited solely to Homer, may or may not have been written solely by him.

male friends but no mention of a sexual relationship is made, though the closeness of the two individuals is similarly described to the relationship that Heracles and Iolus shared. Later poets and historians would modify the relationship to include clear sexual relations between the two men rather than just the deep friendship.

The tale of the two warriors concludes with the death of Patroclus. Achilles sought vengeance against his killer, Hector of Troy. This is often described as seeking retribution for a lost romantic partner and would lead to the death of Achilles at the hands of Paris. This aspect shows a relationship, later a sexual one as well, between two men who share an intimate bond and neither is considered weaker for the relationship, in fact Achilles is considered to be the greatest hero in Grecian legend.

The *Odyssey* is the sequel poem to the *Iliad*. It details the return of King Odysseus to the land of Ithaca after the Trojan War concludes. Due to a small misunderstanding, Odysseus manages to anger the god Poseidon and his voyage home is cursed with misfortune after misfortune which would delay the completion of his journey by over ten years. During this decade, Odysseus encountered multiple challenges and romantic encounters while his wife remained at home stalwart in her belief he lived and was on his way back.

The *Odyssey* offers another example of the duality of adultery as portrayed in Grecian culture. When Helen left with Paris, the Greeks literally chased her down with an army and besieged a city for ten years. However, Odysseus took several lovers over the course of his journey back to Ithaca and it was seen as commonplace or acceptable despite he always proclaiming his intent to return to his wife and child.

By contrast his wife Penelope held to her promise to wait on him to return at least as long as it took for their infant son to grow into a man. Both parties are reunited with no ill aftereffects for the adulterous actions taken by Odysseus.

Lesbianism also occurred in ancient Greece, and the poet Sapphos, who lived in the seventh and sixth century BCE and would become one of ancient Greece's most prolific artists and storytellers, is a great example of amorous relationships among women. . The words *sapphic* and *lesbian* are derived from Sapphos of Lesbos, her island homeland.

Sappho was a popular poet who focused on love between woman, which appears less often as man with man love in Greece. She sought to inspire and empower women with her works in order to normalize their relationships similar to those that the men shared. This is shown in the relatively small amount of her poetry that has survived to the modern day.

Given the stories surrounding her life, Sappho is seen as a tragic figure. Little is actually known about her life other than she was born on the Isle of Lesbos and at some point, near the turn of the century she and her family were exiled from their homeland, probably for political reasons. Speculation also implicates her as having a daughter and having committed suicide, but historical context does not support the latter. With as little as is known for sure about Sapphos, it is not surprising that she became the icon for woman with woman love that she has. It is clear she entertained such sentiments based on the following work:

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me,

The man who sits opposite you  
 And listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter.  
 Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast.  
 For when I look at you for a moment,  
 Then it is no longer possible for me to speak:  
 My tongue has snapped,  
 At once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh,  
 I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me,  
 A trembling seizes me all over,  
 I am greener than the grass,  
 and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.<sup>31</sup>

This poem is describing a woman that Sappho appears to desire or be in love with. She is describing the figure in ways similar to that of men describing the alluring aspects of women. Her statement that the male figure is fortunate is because the male and female figures are in some kind of relationship and Sappho wishes she could take the place of the male and express her love for the female with no obstructions.

The primary historical figure that helps to summarize and represent the views of homosexuality in ancient Greece is the legendary conqueror Alexander the Great. Alexander's mother, Olympias, was often said to have claimed that Alexander was either touched, blessed, or sired by the king of the gods, Zeus. This was something that Alexander was assured of most of his life and shaped large parts of his formative years along with learning the art of military campaigning from his actual father King Philip II of Macedon. When Alexander was twenty, he became king of Macedon

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<sup>31</sup> *Greek Lyric*, trans. W. Barnstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) vol. 1, 79-81, quoted in Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 17, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.winthropuniversity.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI4MjMwMF9fQU41?sid=fea3c1dd-6455-465a-aa18-02c8dc43beaf@sessionmgr4007&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

upon the untimely death of his father, and his legacy of conquest began. The story of Alexander's life is complicated and often shrouded in myth and mystery, but several aspects of it have been made clear and his representation as a lover of men has been confirmed by numerous historical reviews of the time period.

Alexander would spend a significant amount of his rule on campaign in foreign lands. As previously established, during the time of military movements it was not uncommon for Greek soldiers to develop intimate relationships with their fellow soldiers, and Alexander was rumored to be no different in this aspect. There is no concrete evidence of Alexander the Great having homosexual relationships with friends or allies, but there are large amounts of anecdotal evidence of such relationships, especially surrounding Alexander and his lifelong friend Hephaestion. The two of them were often likened to Achilles and Patroclus who were often recorded in legend as being lovers in addition to serving as fighting men. The parallels continued when Hephaestion died and caused Alexander to sink into a deep ennui from which he did not emerge, much like the death of Patroclus led Achilles to depression and then to his death at the hands of Paris of Troy.

Alexander fashioned himself as a living mythological figure. His success as a conqueror and general was unparalleled at that point in history and the Macedonian Empire expanded the borders of Greece to previously unfathomable bounds. With this representation of himself and his relationships, especially while on campaign, the normalcy of homosexuality was once again being seen as just an acceptable practice by much of the empire. This normalcy would continue after the fall of the empire and

into the following years and centuries as the rise of Rome would be the change in the worlds view on same sex relationships.

Greece would eventually be conquered in part and whole by other societies that would incorporate their views on homosexuality and even their myths and legends into the new culture that formed. This would lead to the Byzantine Empire and the rise of both the Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches as power players all while the themes and history present in Greek myth and society were carried forward and examined by each successive culture.

## Chapter 2

### Rome

“Love is like a friendship caught on fire. In the beginning a flame, very pretty, often hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. As love grows older, our hearts mature and our love becomes as coals, deep-burning and unquenchable.”

--Bruce Lee

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The Roman Empire came to replace the Greeks as the dominant political and military power around the Mediterranean Sea and perhaps the world, although Greek culture continued to be influential. In fact, the Romans adopted many Greek cultural values, and among these was the Roman acceptance of homosexuality. To put it simply, Romans did not have a word for homosexuality. It is not an idea that has a place in the Latin language and thus as a concept it would have to be considered so normal that a specific word defining it did not have to exist. While it could be argued that the opposite is true, that the Latin language excluded the idea due to its absence in the Roman culture rather than its regularity, the large amounts of Roman documentation describing the elements to homosexual relations and standards of masculinity prove that it was a commonplace part of the culture.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how the Romans viewed and practiced homosexuality. While they clearly did not see love between two men as extraordinary, it could have an impact on social standing based on the roles each individual played in sexual intercourse, leaving the reputations of some men at risk

despite the overall acceptance of homosexuality in Roman society. The beliefs of homosexuality and the normalcy it was viewed with came from the Roman appropriation of other cultures and their views on the subject. Rome was very much a hodge-podge of cultural diversity as they conquered and allowed the members of previous cultures to become Roman and thus diverse views were the societal norm. As they adopted aspects of various religions from the far corners of the empire, the Romans did not shy away from the aspect of homosexuality.<sup>32</sup>

Male same sex partners were seen as a regular aspect of life, but only up to a certain point. While having sex with another man might not affect a person's reputation, the person in question had to have an affirmative role in the act in order to avoid any kind of stigma associated with the loss of stature. In order to avoid looking like less of a man, he had to be the penetrator in the exchange and not the other way around. Since the act itself requires a minimum of two participants, this could lead to issues as there was no way for both partners to avoid the stigma of being on the receiving end of the act. The one of the pair who became known as the dominated or took on the feminine role would be seen as having lost a large aspect of their

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<sup>32</sup> Saara Lilja, *Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome* (Helsinki, Finland: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1983), 122. Lilja states, "Homosexual relations with slaves seem to have been generally accepted, provided that the slave acted as the passive partner. The same sharp distinction between passive and active roles also determined the general attitude towards homosexual relations between freeborn citizens: while the active partner was accepted or at least tolerated, the passive partner's submissive role was ridiculed. Bisexuality seems to have been considered as a normal phenomenon, but again only if the male in a homosexual contact acted as the active partner as he did in a heterosexual contact." She goes on to state in her notes on this, that "though Greek and Latin had no terms corresponding to 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual,' these modern terms, of course, can be applied to the Greeks and Romans as naturally as so many other terms which have no equivalents in the ancient languages."

masculinity. This would lead to a significant reduction of social status as many Romans based their primary standing in society around their portrayal of how masculine they were.<sup>33</sup>

There were several ways around this stigma outside of the military, though three were the most pervasive: the notion of *infamis*; slavery; and male on male rape. The first was the notion of *infamis*. *Infamis* is a Latin term describing one who has lost the stature afforded to a regular, free citizen of the Republic. As someone of this status was already considered decreased in the eyes of the state, taking a submissive role in sex did not matter, as they already had little to lose in the way of stature. *Infamis* included freed slaves, male prostitutes, and entertainers as well as foreign residents. Men who were seen as in this light would not be able to hold certain positions of influence such as in politics or would be passed over by customers for other businesses offering similar good and/or services.<sup>34</sup>

Although slaves in Rome were more like an indentured servant in colonial United States as opposed to a slave who would inherit their social status in the antebellum South, Roman slaves were still considered property in the eyes of the law, and thus not human. This meant that slaves could willingly be the submissive partner in a homosexual relationship and not lose status, as they were literally the bottom of the social ladder. In fact, a man who raped a slave could be charged with, at most,

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<sup>33</sup> Lilja, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Catharine Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett, and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 66-95.

destruction of property no matter the severity of the attack.<sup>35</sup>

Rape was the third means of avoiding a loss of standing socially. Rome acknowledged that rape was unquestionably a thing that happened and had many laws in place regarding the practice. These laws were progressive at the time of the Republic, and even progressive by today's standards when compared to particularly harsh legal systems from around the world. In the eyes of the state, the victim of rape was never held as accountable for the act. So, if a man was raped by another man, or claimed it as such, then he would not lose social standing despite having been the recipient in the coupling.<sup>36</sup>

Being submissive was, therefore, frowned upon unless there were extenuating circumstances, male on male lovers were largely considered to be a normal part of life across Roman territories. Some pre-Christian religious cults had negative attitudes toward the practice, but these were a vast minority and did not influence policy or society. As the Romans adopted religious practices from other cultures and incorporated them into their regular belief system such as the appropriation of gods from other cultures and revamping them to fit more Roman ideals of war and conquest, general views on things like homosexuality were incorporated as well into society. Even these foreign amalgamations were largely tolerant of homosexuality.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas A.J. McGuinn, "Prostitution: Controversies and New Approaches" in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014), 91. This notion is mirrored by Craig Williams in his book *Roman Homosexuality*.

<sup>36</sup> McGuinn, 90-92.

<sup>37</sup> Eva Cantarella, a professor of Roman and Ancient Greek law at the University of Milan, wrote in her book *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, "'For my part I think this practice had its origins in the Greek gymnasias, where that kind of loving was free and permitted,' writes Cicero – who in his own private life was no stranger to homosexual love." p. 97.

Due to the tolerance and abundance, so to speak, of male on male relationships, it was not uncommon for homosexuality to be seen in the pop culture of the day which largely consisted of oratory or performance art as well as paintings, frescos, and sculptures. This is more than just the myths and legends that included tales of same sex relationships shared between mythological heroes and their less masculine submissives, but also in art; artistic renderings of male on male sex appeared in Roman art, albeit not as often as in Greek art. Perhaps this was because in Roman culture, in images, only free men wore clothing. To be portrayed nude was a disgrace as it showed a loss of masculinity and would therefor subject someone to the more feminine role that was often used for those on the receiving portion of the act of sodomy. This was usually meant for those who had lost at some kind of contest or battle or those who had been feminized in the act of penetration so that they had lost status.<sup>38</sup>

While clothing indicated the status of Roman men, the use of phallic symbol was very much in use. Most often portrayed in art or in the form of wearable jewelry, exaggeratedly large phalli were seen as prime symbols of masculinity in a manner that large cars or large firearms are seen in the modern day. The phallus had widespread representation in art as well as in personal charms and totems, often used to ward off bad energy or effects such as people would use a cross or pentagram charm today. This again demonstrates how comfortable Romans were with the

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<sup>38</sup> Historians are now seeing the prevalence of homosexual depictions from archeologists who have been working to restore the frescoes and mosaics in the city of Pompeii. Many of these frescoes depict brothel scenes which appear to have two men engaged in different sexual acts.

masculine form, both in clothed and nude states, despite the different aspects of life and station they represented.



Photograph take 26 October 2006 of an erotic fresco in Pompeii. Photograph courtesy of [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/steve-chalke-pompeii-ancient-roman-porn\\_n\\_596fb1fee4b0110cb3cb542a](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/steve-chalke-pompeii-ancient-roman-porn_n_596fb1fee4b0110cb3cb542a).

The most prominent literature that involves the idea of lesbianism comes from the poet Ovid in his epic poem *Metamorphoses*. In one part of the poem a child is born to a couple when the father desperately wanted a son. In order to protect the baby from its father's wrath, the mother hid the gender and named the baby Iphis, which further obscured the gender of the baby because Iphis was a gender-neutral name. The baby grew up raised as a boy and was set to be wed to a maiden named Ianthe. The two figures fell in love but when Ianthe found out Iphis's secret, she was reviled by the love they shared and described it as a desecration. The myth ends

happily as the goddess Isis changes Iphis into a male and the two are able to continue their romance as a heterosexual couple.<sup>39</sup>

As a regular part of society, homosexuality penetrated all parts of the culture of pre-Christian Rome and its outlying territories. Even though Roman social practices in the provinces sometimes assimilated local beliefs and practices, even these often had a Roman bent to them.

There were, however, two areas where the practice of male on male love stood out from the normal society at large: in politics and in the military. Politics was seen as one of the highest callings in Roman society. Romans had said they would never again have a king and thus the Senate was the highest power in the land (outside of individuals who had an army to support them). Politicians wielded immense power and influence, especially if they were elected to the role of Tribune, a position that wielded the power of supreme veto. But to be a politician one must be a free Roman who had the love of the people they represented, and to do this they must not have lost status due to a lack of masculinity. One achieved political rank via their populace's popular vote and thus they had to maintain themselves in a manner that would be seen as acceptable and proper leadership material. In other words, homosexual relationships had the capacity to undermine the status of politicians or potential politicians. The practice of homosexuality changed drastically once it was politicized due to the negative stigma of loss of masculinity and thus loss of standing

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<sup>39</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Sir Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al, Book the Ninth. <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.9.ninth.html>.

among one's peers. In the political arena, homosexuality became a weapon. And like any dagger, homosexuality was a political weapon that could leave a man broken and beyond repair.<sup>40</sup>

Common practice involved accusing politicians of being effeminate, with the most cited practice being the act of crossdressing. This may have generated a response, but such accusations are hard to disprove and only become more believable if the accused vehemently denies the act. If a politician was accused of being penetrated in a tryst with another man, it would mean the end to their political career unless they could disprove the accusations. The act of male on male love, even when acting as the masculine partner in the coupling, was often seen as far too much of a risk by Roman politicians and thus was commonly eschewed entirely. This would lead to politicians having a more "stand-offish" view when it came to homosexual affairs (the actions kind, not the relationship kind) and other rights related to those of same sex persuasion. Since it was low risk to simply accuse opponents of homosexuality, this practice became more common over time. However, the effect of such accusations was lessened with repeated use. The act was a good example of over exposure lessening the impact of the accusations almost down to the point of being comical.<sup>41</sup>

The military was central to Roman life and identity, and Rome herself was

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<sup>40</sup> James L. Butrica, "Some Myths and Anomalies in the Study of Roman Sexuality," in *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, ed. Beert Verstraete (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 223.

<sup>41</sup> Butrica, 224.

seen as warlike. The Roman military was a force to be feared across the ancient world with its elite units and well-trained infantry. The Roman legions were comprised of soldiers who had completed basic military training, only to create a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. Roman legions were fierce, and throughout their history, the Romans had numerous legions. Indeed, the legion was core to the Roman military identity. Often, they defeated enemy armies that were much larger.

Legions were comprised of men that could be split up into various units and applied tactically against enemies both foreign and domestic. This meant that men in legions were sent far and wide across the republic and spent years away from their families and social support groups. As with any unit that does this, they formed other support groups among their fellow brothers in arms. Naturally, this meant that deep personal relationships were established among the soldiers.

However, unlike the less restricted civilian activities, Roman soldiers were expected to perform with a modicum of self-control at all times in their life. This meant that certain acts, including heterosexual sex ,were restricted. For almost two and a half centuries, even being married was banned. This left soldiers with a driving need for an alternative in order to take care of urges. Same-sex relationships were sometimes used to accomplish this.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Valerius Maximus, "6.1.10," in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, Thomas K. Hubbard, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003),314-315. This passage describes a veteran war hero of the Roman Empire who "negotiated an act of sexual immorality with a freeborn adolescent." This work goes on to describe that the veteran pled to have a

Although homosexuality thus occurred in the Roman military, the stigma of feminization via penetration still held true. Soldiers in a same sex relationship had to either keep secret who fulfilled what role in their coupling or one of the two had to face loss of status due to the less masculine role they would take during sex. Due to this the topic was often either used in an accusatory fashion by a soldier's detractors or avoided by peers to prevent unnecessary issues arising. One other option existed as well. Fellatio was not considered to be a feminine act in itself, and thus a soldier could give as much as desired without calling their masculinity into question.<sup>43</sup>

Other means for satisfying sexual desires and needs existed for Roman soldiers. As was true in larger Roman society, sex with prostitutes or slaves was acceptable for soldiers. These groups were considered to be second class in the best of times and in the worst of times less than human, so sex with them was not a violation of oath. It would not cause any loss of status.

Having social "permission" to sleep with prostitutes and slaves caused a peculiar phenomenon associated with the legions as they moved about the empire on their assigned duties: camp followers. The legions were such a massive force that they essentially resembled a mobile town. The legion was often followed by various sellers of goods and services, creating a mobile camp of its own. For their part, legionnaires were regularly paid, and they sometimes needed sundry items and other services not supplied by the military machine. This was often joked about by the

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citizen tribune investigate the allegations on the grounds that the adolescent "was accustomed to derive profit from his body openly and without pretense."

<sup>43</sup> Hubbard, 391-393.

troops, as these mobile camps would leave before the legion did in the morning and set up camp where the legion would end up at the end of the day. . Therefore, the age-old laws of supply and demand drove these unique followers, and prostitutes of both sexes were always in demand and a significant part of these mobile support camps.<sup>44</sup>

Rape makes its way into the sexual practices within the military context as well. Many Roman soldiers saw sex as a spoil of war, and so was a common practice after the sacking of a city or town. The act of being raped was seen as a defeat for any given Roman soldier, though it would not count towards any further loss of status or masculinity beyond what was typically associated with a defeat. The soldier would not lose more because they were raped in the act of being conquered. For those in the role of conqueror, the act of war-rape, as it has been called, is just another part of victory. The Romans do not seem to distinguish between male and female victims in these instances.<sup>45</sup>

Another common issue in the military was when individuals with power used their status to force their subordinates to perform acts that violated their personal beliefs or even sworn oaths. What would happen is an officer would use his influence to coerce sex from lower ranking soldiers, even forcing them to take the feminine role. In this case, the victims would lose their masculinity. Sometimes forced sex was a form of extortion used to keep the subordinate soldier silent, as the officer could use

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, 120-121.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, 152-153.

their feminization as leverage and thus extort further acts with less resistance. Or it could be used as a form of humiliation. Someone of lesser rank would be not only disgraced by the act performed under order but also by the loss of masculine status and the damage to their military career.<sup>46</sup>

While forcing subordinates to have sex with them was something that higher-ranking officers could do, it was not something that was encouraged and could even be grounds for disciplinary action. This is because it was every soldier's right to be able to maintain their sexual integrity. For example, a well-known historian named Plutarch told of a soldier named Trebonius, who, due to his fair appearance, drew the attention of an officer named Gias Lucius. Trebonius would find himself often called to Lucius's tent, where the superior officer made sexual advances and performed other acts that attacked his masculinity. This all came to a head one night when Lucius attempted to forcibly consummate the perceived relationship and Trebonius objected to the feminization. In the melee that followed, Trebonius drew his blade and killed Gias Lucius. Because Lucius was Trebonius's superior officer, this act was tantamount to treason. However, due to recorded instances when Trebonius had objected to Lucius's advances and commands, he was judged to have acted in defense of self. Trebonius' honor was restored, and he was absolved of the crime.<sup>47</sup>

In the military, therefore, men were not allowed to have open and equal relationships with other men and those who did were punished. There always had to

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<sup>46</sup> Hubbard, 314-315.

<sup>47</sup> Plutarch and Arthur H. Clough, *Plutarch's Lives* (Champaign, Ill: Project Gutenberg, nd), 398.

be a subjugation or a conquest, or the sex had to be with a lower-class citizen such as a male prostitute or slave. Otherwise, a homosexual act, outside of fellatio, was unjustifiable. If a soldier could not justify his actions, then the most common disciplinary action was the *fulstarium*. The accused would be thrown into a circle of his fellow legionnaires, who would club him to death.

These attitudes towards homosexuality in both the civilian and military world of Rome would continue through the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire in the first century B.C.E. As Rome grew, its expansion meant the incorporation of numerous new cultures and belief systems. Even with all of these changes, homosexuality was largely viewed in the same light. Civilians has a live and let live attitude, and everyone knew the social consequences of being exposed as a submissive partner in a homosexual relationship. Still, there were no laws that expressly forbade the act. The Romans did not even have a word for homosexuals or homosexuality.

## Chapter 3

### The Jews

“Love isn’t something that you find. Love is something that finds you.” –

Loretta Young

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Although less is known about their history outside of the religious texts, the Jewish, also known as Hebrews and sometimes Israelite, peoples were ancient, contemporary with the Greeks and the Romans.<sup>48</sup> The earliest nonreligious texts that describe the Jews are the Babylonian records documenting their conquest of the region back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. In fact, during that time, the Assyrians and the Babylonians defeated and even conquered the Jewish tribes living in the Holy Land, with the Babylonians capturing many Jews and forcing them to live as slaves in Babylonian territory. With the rise of the Persian Empire, many Jewish communities found acceptance. The Persian emperor, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon and freed the enslaved Jewish peoples. They were sent back to their homeland, where Cyrus helped them re-establish themselves and even worked with them so that they

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<sup>48</sup> Throughout their history, the Jewish people have migrated from location to location carrying much of their history with them. Associated with the Holy Land today, the Jews lost control of their homeland to the Romans around the year 0 CE, only returning to control what is today the State of Israel in the twentieth century after almost 2,000 years. Even in Antiquity, the Jewish people were exiled to Egypt and Babylon for long stretches. Thus, other groups wrote down the records that describe the Jews. This issue has often compounded due to other cultures marginalizing the Jews, labeling them unwanted and outcasts in society.

could rebuild their temple, which had been destroyed.<sup>49</sup> In the first century BCE, the Romans came into the region, initially establishing a subject kingdom under Herod the Great, and eventually taking over the region outright. The Jews were one of many groups living under Roman rule, and this would continue for several centuries.<sup>50</sup>

Of course, Jesus of Nazareth was born into this Roman world during the reign of the first emperor, Augustus (r. 27 BCE – 14 CE). Jesus was a Jew, and Jewish traditions were certainly influential on Christianity. While Christianity would not establish itself as a wholly separate religion until sometime in the second century CE,<sup>51</sup> Christian understanding of homosexuality would reflect Jewish traditions that went back centuries. The purpose of this chapter is to understand how homosexuality was perceived in Jewish culture in Antiquity. While the Jews did clearly conceptualize the act of sex between two men as an abomination and did not even acknowledge the act of sex between two women, they were not concerned with, nor did they even have a name for, love between two people of the same sex.

The Jewish tribe followed a religious and historic text known as the Torah, and part of the text was a variety of laws and mandates that were in place to help restrict and clarify the rules of the faith and of the communities that the Jewish people

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<sup>49</sup> Kurash (Cyrus) the Great, “The Kurash Prism” in *Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University, ed., <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/539cyrus1.asp>.

<sup>50</sup> John Allegro, *The Chosen People: A Study of Jewish History from the Time of the Exile Until the Revolt of Bar Kocheba* (Luton, Bedfordshire: Andrews UK LTD, 2015), 34-40.

<sup>51</sup> Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.

formed. Like any collection of laws, punishments for the various offenses were varied and dependent on evidence and provability. While the idea that homosexuality was punishable by death underscored how serious this law was, there is no evidence that this sentence was carried out in ancient Jewish communities.

The first five books of the Old Testament, namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are known as “The Law” in English traditions, the “Torah” to Jews (Hebrew traditions), and the Greeks called it the “Pentateuch.” These five books tell the history of the Hebrew people through the death of Moses. In fact, in the Middle Ages, it was assumed to be written by Moses himself. Regardless, the Torah is a religious text that describes the beliefs and history of the Jewish people through the time of Moses and his final teachings just before the people would enter the land of Canaan. In this text, the core of Jewish beliefs is outlined as well as religious practices to be followed. Other powerful kingdoms often controlled the Hebrew peoples, but Jewish identity remained unique. They were not beholden to anyone but themselves, and the Jews continued to grow as a culture while the kingdoms and empires that they inhabited rose and fell. But the Torah captures many of the Jewish norms and customs that were firmly established in the Jewish community by the birth of Christ.

Jewish understanding of homosexuality can be found in the Torah. In this text, the laws of the people are defined by 613 commandments given to Moses by Yahweh. The 208<sup>th</sup> commandment declares that “You shall not lie down with a male, as

with a woman: this is an abomination.”<sup>52</sup> This commandment and the others located in the same set of proclamations would be reinterpreted to become the book of Leviticus in the Christian bible. This book would eventually inspire religious persecution against homosexuals, although this practice would not begin in earnest until the rise of the Catholic Church.

The Jews have largely approached this particular commandment in a different manner, though. While capital punishment was the stated penalty for the offense of male homosexuality, there is no record in any history that this punishment was administered, even when the act was discovered. Part of the reason that homosexuals were not punished may be due to the fact that it was hard to show proof of this behavior. And perhaps the Jews had a less serious approach to some of the commandments, as they contain a long list of restrictions on a man’s sexual relations, including, but not limited to, a man’s sister, his mother, his father’s wife, his son’s daughter; and any given animal. Further, there is no reference to a woman laying with a woman, but that is largely attributed to rabbinical law defining sex as necessitating the release of semen. It is possible that all of these laws were approached on a case by case basis and they were not deemed worthy of capital punishment.<sup>53</sup>

As mentioned, there also was burden of proof. Accusers were required to show evidence for the offense to be confirmed as a true violation of the commandment. It seems that the man had to be caught in the act of intercourse, and at

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<sup>52</sup> Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:22.

<sup>53</sup> Scheindlin, 135.

least two witnesses had to be present to attest to the act. In addition, the man must have been warned that he is committing an act that could result in capital punishment, and the man must have acknowledged the warning and proceeded with the act anyway. With this burden of proof, it appears that the law was more of a moral deterrent than an enforceable offense.<sup>54</sup>

Like the Romans and the Greeks, the Jewish culture helped to drive societal norms, and it certainly helped shape homosexual identity. Stories and teachings not only highlighted the important figures of the culture, but also helped to teach via anecdote and example. And like the Greeks and Romans, Jewish culture would take the form of religious teachings and stories. The Torah never addressed how a person might emotionally identify as homosexual, and this idea was not itself considered a sin. As stated in the commandments, sodomy and homosexual acts were punishable sins. The act of lying with another man sexually was the focal point of all of the rules and arguments. The act of being in love or having a romantic relationship with a member of the same sex was not addressed and does not seem to have caused any social issues, as no significant mention of it is made in the histories. Jewish law did not address men who loved one another or were even a couple; the sex act itself was the thing that was punishable by death.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the fact that the statement found in the Torah was applied very

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<sup>54</sup> Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 387.

<https://archive.org/details/DanbyMishnah/page/n415/mode/2up/search/capital+punishment>.

<sup>55</sup> Wayne R. Dynes, Warren Johansson, William A. Percy, and Stephen Donaldson, eds., "Judaism, Post-Biblical," in *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1990), 641-644.

specifically to a sexual act, and not homosexuality in general, a number of different interpretations of this original law have come about. There was an absolutist view that all homosexuality in any form is a mortal sin and thus was punishable by death. Another interpretation was that only those who have partaken of a sexual act with a member of the same sex were considered to have sinned, but romantic feelings and gestures were acceptable. The last view was that as the commandment specifically mentioned men lying with men, so there can be no determination or statement on female homosexuality. These interpretations are still debated, with Orthodox Judaism taking the “any is bad” approach, while more progressive denominations skew from that to the less harsh options.

The Torah, however, was more than just a collection of commandments and treatises. It contains stories of historic/mythic figures such as Adam and Eve, Moses, and Abraham, and these stories are inundated with lessons that partially define Jewish cultural identity. And several of these stories contain Jewish views on things like homosexuality. Three such stories include Sodom and Gomorrah, the Book of Ruth which details the relationship of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, and an interpretation of the relationship shared by David and Jonathon, son of Saul.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an oft repeated story that relays what happens when scripture is ignored or when sin runs rampant. It is included as a valuable lesson in all three of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and it serves as a cornerstone to conversations centering around morality and things like homosexuality. The destruction of the two cities is something that has

become so widely known as to be a permanent part of culture, even today, but the story behind the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah is a very detailed one open to nuance and interpretation.<sup>56</sup>

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were located on the river Jordan near the land of Canaan. Ruled by the city of Zora with two other cities, Sodom and Gomorrah were in a constant state of war. In the time of Abraham, God became aware of the sin and depravity practiced in these cities. Rumors abounded about the cruelty inherent in the region and their culture of xenophobia and torture. One of the offenses often cited was that the city dwellers would take a foreigner and give them a bed for the night. If the foreigner was too short for the bed, they would stretch them on a rack or with livestock until they fit. If the foreigner was too tall, they would chop off a sufficient length to fit the bed.<sup>57</sup>

Even with these cruelties, the cities continued on until they finally drew the wrath of God. This was said to be caused by two events: the burning of two girls and an encounter with a foreigner. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had a specific law in place called the provision of bread and water. If someone provided sustenance to the poor, they would be put to death. The incident began when a rich girl and a poor girl exchanged a container of bread and a container of water at the local well. This was considered bestowing charity and thus both had violated the law. As punishment, the girls were taken to the town square and burned on a pyre. In the second incident, a

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<sup>56</sup> Bereishit (Genesis) Chapter 19.

<sup>57</sup> Bereishit (Genesis) Chapter 19.

local woman interacted with a foreigner. Outsiders were normally attacked by citizens or driven out, and, upon learning that this foreign man was leaving, she gave him a loaf of bread to take with him. Upon hearing of this transgression, the citizens dragged the woman through the streets and tied her to a stake. They smeared honey all over her body and let bees sting her to death.<sup>58</sup>

The woman's screams triggered God's wrath. Two angels were sent to punish the cities, and they met with the prophet, Abraham. He was able to convince them that if they were able to find ten righteous people living in one of the cities, then that city would be spared. Abraham's nephew Lot and his family lived within the cities. Upon arrival, the angels were identified as foreigners and taken in by Lot to stay with his family. But the citizens came to Lot's house and demanded that the foreigners be sent out and be "known" to them. Lot even offered to send out his two virgin daughters instead of the angels, but the citizens turned down his offer. This action sealed the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot was given a chance to escape, and both cities were destroyed in fire and brimstone, with Lot's wife left a bit salty about the whole affair.<sup>59</sup>

Homosexuality enters the picture with two different interpretations of the phrase "to know them." It is possible that the citizens were just untrusting of foreigners and wanted to interrogate or even torture the men in a manner similar to what the more xenophobic regimes would do today. Another possible interpretation is

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<sup>58</sup> Bereishit (Genesis) Chapter 19.

<sup>59</sup> Bereishit (Genesis) Chapter 19.

that “to know them” referred to the citizens demanding that Lot give up the angels in order for them to be raped in a homosexual manner. The merits on either side are unclear. The phrase “to know” was used many times in the Torah, and only rarely referred to sexual intercourse. However, one of the times “to know” appears to refer to sex is when Lot offered up his virgin daughters, when he specifically commented that they had never known a man. The arguments strongly imply that even if they were acting out of a fear of foreigners, rape was still part of the plan.<sup>60</sup>

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah highlights how the Jewish people viewed sinful acts, such as homosexuality, at the time. These were things that were both deserving of, and significant enough to draw, God’s wrath. It was held up as an example of what could happen if things like homosexuality were accepted as the norm instead of as an abomination. The term sodomy came into nomenclature through this story, as it was set in Sodom.

The Book of Ruth contains another story that implies homosexuality and would have a significant influence on Jewish culture. The Book of Ruth took place after the book of Judges in the Torah, and the tribes of Israel were an established part of the narrative. The story describes an outsider converting to the Jewish faith and staying loyal to her husband’s family even after their ties had been severed by death. Ruth, a native of the country of Moab, where the Jewish immigrants Elimelech and his wife Naomi traveled to with their two sons, Chilion and Mahlon, was first introduced to Judaism by her husband. Ruth was married to Mahlon shortly after

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<sup>60</sup> Bereishit (Genesis) Chapter 19.

Elimelech died. They were married for nearly a decade when Mahlon and his brother also passed away, leaving their wives and mother widows. Naomi instructed Ruth and her other daughter-in-law to return to their families so that they could be cared for and eventually remarry. Ruth however, opted to stay with her mother-in-law, claiming that they now shared a culture and belief in one god. It has been argued that, as a convert, Ruth wanted to continue with her adopted faith. The best way to do so would be to leave Moab, which was known for antisemitism and hedonism, and stay with Naomi in the lands of Israel. That she would go on to marry Boaz, an in-law of Naomi, was just an extension of Jewish custom and a matter of securing inheritance. However, another interpretation is that Ruth was in love with Naomi, and she only marries into the family in order to get close to her. The idea is that she stayed with Naomi on the journey back to Israel because of a mutual romantic affection at that point.<sup>61</sup>

There are some complications to this story that aren't immediately noticeable on the surface. With Ruth joining Naomi on her journey home, they would have been a couple without a man to provide for them. The issue was that under Jewish law at the time women were not considered individuals. This meant that neither Naomi nor Ruth could claim or use the inheritance from either of their husbands and they had no legal protection. In order to protect Naomi and allow them to access what was rightfully theirs, Ruth married Boaz so that they would no longer be vulnerable. She would later go on to have his children and her line would become the ancestors of

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<sup>61</sup> Rut (Ruth) 1:15-18.

David, greatest hero of the faith.

The homosexual interpretation of Ruth is in direct contrast to the homophobic tone and message of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Book of Ruth, there are no outright displays of homosexuality or references to sex acts between the two women.

However, it is possible that any such descriptions were edited out when the text was altered to align it with the commandments and more strictly interpret things like homosexuality. Regardless, same sex romance was not a sin itself. Only same sex sexual intercourse, or even sodomy, when performed by men, was considered a sin.

Finally, the biblical story of David might contain references to a homosexual relationship. David is quite possibly the most celebrated hero of the Jewish tradition. Supplanting Saul, David was the first true king of Israel, and therefore was the first ruler of a unified Jewish kingdom or state in the land promised them by God. David is revered in the Jewish faith. But his relationship with Jonathan, the son of Saul, is a point of contention.<sup>62</sup>

David's relationship with King Saul, and later Jonathan, began when the Jews faced the Philistine army. Traditionally, the leader of the army could challenge the other force to single combat in lieu of a pitched battle in order to save lives. For the Philistines, this challenger was the giant Goliath, who would call to the army of Saul every day for five days. Everyday King Saul would fail to answer the challenge as was his place to do so, as king. On the fifth day, Saul's armor bearer and personal musician, David, agreed to answer Goliath's challenge. Refusing armor and a sword,

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<sup>62</sup> Shmuel I (I Samuel) 18:1-5.

David went to meet the challenge with only a staff and a sling. With these he slayed the giant Goliath and became beloved of the king and of Israel. With David at the head of his army, Saul was a success, and David became popular among the troops. Saul's son Jonathan became very good friends with David and would even later betray his father Saul in order to protect him. Concerned that David was too popular and might try to take the throne for himself, Saul sought to have David killed. But Jonathan warned David and he escaped. Later Saul would commit suicide, and David became king. Perhaps the best evidence of the possible relationship between David and Jonathan is after Jonathan dies. David found his corpse and said "we have shared a love more pleasing than even that of man and woman." While the interpretations of this could imply that the love was a bond shared deeper than that of romantic interest, the similarities to other stories and relationships at the time such as from the Greeks leave open the interpretation of homosexuality.<sup>63</sup>

David and Jonathan are figures similar in presentation to pairings like Heracles and Iolus and Achilles and Patroclus. They were described as being as close as brothers or even more so. Two close male figures portrayed as having a deep and passionate love for each other is, therefore, a recurring theme in Antiquity, regardless of the culture. While recovered texts never explicitly mention that the two, David and Jonathan, were lovers, there is an undertone to the story that suggests homosexuality. Jonathan's and David's actions do not refute this, even if they don't explicitly support it, either.

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<sup>63</sup> Shmuel II (II Samuel) 1:26.

Some of the issues in finding exactly whether the early Jewish people did or did not accept homosexual love is due to the migratory nature of their kingdoms and culture. In the first and second millennia BCE, they spent time as nomads before establishing themselves around the Dead Sea and spreading to the coast of the Mediterranean. There is no archeological evidence to support a massive Jewish kingdom in the Holy Land, and the only record of the events is from the Jewish religion itself, meaning it is a biased source.

However, many of the tales and views found in Leviticus could have been adapted from other regional cultures. While moving into and assimilating with other cultures, the Jewish people always remained assuredly Jewish in their self-identification. They saw themselves as a people displaced rather than as a blended and integrated part of the society. They practiced their religion, which they carried with them in their displacement, and taught from the Torah despite living among people who practiced a different religion. They did their best to adhere and respect the laws of their new homes, while at the same time following their own law as presented in the Torah. Then Jesus happened. In other words, perhaps these three stories, namely Sodom and Gomorrah, Ruth, and David and Jonathan, contain interpolations from other cultures, and say little about Jewish understandings of homosexuality at that time. But the Jews seem to have maintained a unique identity, and so maybe these stories were uniquely their own. Regardless, these stories came to be part of the Torah, and, therefore, remain a part of the Jewish tradition by the time of Christ.

During the first century CE, Jewish views on certain lifestyles also began to shift. The Romans dispersed the Jews in the first and second centuries, and, due to the lack of a centralized temple and homeland, the Jewish people began to relax rabbinical laws. This meant that those violations that were capital offenses according to Jewish Law might not be handled in such a strict manner. Homosexuality was among these.

Homosexuality has never been fully accepted by Orthodox Judaism. While homosexual men are not executed in modern Judaism, the tenor of the law is accepted, and sodomy is seen as an abomination. This has not prevented several rabbis from proclaiming themselves as homosexual and continuing to function as religious leaders. Reformist and reconstructionist Judaism has openly accepted homosexuality and all of its aspects and has largely moved away from two-thousand-year-old rabbinical law. A part of the reasons implied for the acceptance is that the two cultures share many of the same experiences over history, even if the clear overlap in their populations is less discernable. Things like the Spanish Inquisition, constant persecution, and the Nazi regimes heavily effected both of the culture populations, and thus in horrors shared the two have been able to begin to heal.

## Chapter 4

### Christianity

“Love knows not distance; it hath no continent; its eyes are for the stars.”

-- Gilbert Parker

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In the first century CE, a Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth began to preach in the Roman province of Judea. He came to be seen as a Jewish messiah and those who believed in Jesus, later called Christians, consider him to be God incarnate. As he preached, he was joined by twelve disciples who would spread his message after having learned from him. Since the term messiah was seen at the time as being a person who would lead the Jews and overthrow their oppressors, the Romans likely saw Jesus as a “King of the Jews,” and, therefore, a threat to their hegemony. Perceiving Jesus as a political and religious dissenter, the Romans crucified him.<sup>64</sup>

Immediately following his death, disciples and other early followers began to spread Jesus’ message while at the same time corroborating and assimilating their memories and revelations into a cohesive whole. These writings would be collected together, and, over two centuries later would become what is considered the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The New Testament was combined with the Old Testament, which contained a compilation of Jewish scriptural writings including the

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<sup>64</sup> Adrian Hastings, *A World History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 38.

Torah.<sup>65</sup> But, while the God of the Old Testament had a covenant with the Hebrew peoples, who were expected to adhere to religious law and sacrifice to God, Jesus' message was one of kindness and forgiveness as well as being accepting of people from different creeds and lifestyles. Given Jesus preached a message of acceptance and love, would homosexuality be more readily accepted among Christians? A close look at the early Christian community's response to homosexuality suggests that early Christians, as they shaped their identity during periods of persecution, took a hard line at interpreting old Jewish laws that mentioned homosexuality, and, in so doing, labeled more people homosexuals while simultaneously creating harsher punishments for those who were found to be homosexual. On a basic level, the early Christians found any effeminate man or same sex couple an abomination while the Jewish interpretation of the law required the act of sodomy to have been witnessed, warned, and confirmed.

After Jesus of Nazareth was arrested, condemned, and swiftly executed sometime around the year 30 CE or shortly thereafter, the followers of Jesus continued to promote his message. His former disciples were now called apostles, and they went out to spread Jesus' ideas. In so doing, the apostles began to form a new religion. Something that started small and contained would become more and more powerful after the death of Jesus than it had been during his lifetime.<sup>66</sup>

Because the apostles focused on Jesus' message of acceptance, Christianity

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<sup>65</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. I: The Early Church to the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 39-43.

<sup>66</sup> Hastings, 44.

was an appealing to non-Jews and the poorer people of the world. The apostles did not require any sacrifice, as was done in the Jewish temple, or tithing, at least not yet.<sup>67</sup> The early Christian community viewed Adam as sinning against God while in the Garden of Eden, and they came to believe that Jesus—God—had died for everyone’s sins. Jesus himself would be the sacrifice that would promise forgiveness for any and all who would follow him, and, after he was crucified by the Romans, it was believed that no other sacrifices would ever need to be made in order to absolve a Christian of sin.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the Jews made a covenant with God, sacrificing and following Jewish law, established with Moses’ Ten Commandments, but Jesus’ concept of forgiveness replaced this.<sup>69</sup> Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and his message, therefore, supplanted Adam and provided a new path for forgiveness. Jesus was the sacrifice. In other words, Christian teachings established that while everyone was predetermined to be sinful, they could be forgiven by following Jesus and his message instead of the traditional Jewish tenets, most specifically regarding sacrifices and forgiveness.<sup>70</sup> This idea was compelling to many people. Further, Christians did not have to adhere to strict Jewish laws, and it cost less, as sacrifices were expensive.<sup>71</sup>

While the early Christians generally came to admit outsiders, who wanted to

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<sup>67</sup> Hastings, 152.

<sup>68</sup> Kenneth Scott Latorette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1975), chap 1, Kindle. Latorette, chap 1.

<sup>69</sup> Latorette, chap 1.

<sup>70</sup> Latorette, chap. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Latorette, chap. 1 and 2.

follow Jesus' message, they were not themselves immediately accepted in the Roman Empire or among Jews. The Romans had adopted various acts and practices from various different peoples, and one of the more significant incorporated customs was that the Roman emperor was seen as a divine or semi-divine figure worthy of worship. Early Christians could not accept this, and thus refused to offer a sacrifice to the emperor, much less acknowledge his divinity. The Romans considered denying the divinity of the emperor as treasonous, and they persecuted the Christians for their refusal to participate in these sacrifices.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the first two and a half centuries of existence were fraught with peril for the juvenile faith. Christians were often persecuted and even martyred for their faith. They would have their property seized and be beaten or executed. Even the Jewish community, which had so recently been their own, sought to distance itself from the Christians. The Jews also rebelled against the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries, and so the Christians, in turn, worked to distinguish themselves from the Jews. Despite all the persecution and conflict, Christianity grew steadily over the centuries to become one of the largest religions in the European world.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the portrayal of Christianity as accepting and forgiving, the actions of those in the religion often ran counter to the edicts proclaimed. Although the New Testament was the primary scripture for Christians, the Old Testament was also a part of the Christian bible and it contained older Jewish laws such as the Ten

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<sup>72</sup> González, 32.

<sup>73</sup> González, 28.

Commandments and the Book of Leviticus. Because of this, the concepts of mortal sins and acts punishable by death could be used as justification for execution and excommunication. One of the lifestyles targeted by these edicts was homosexuality.<sup>74</sup>

From the start, the early apostles commented on homosexuality. None other than the apostle Paul wrote one of the earliest Christian missives in regard to homosexuality and same-sex intercourse in the book of Romans, which, of course, is considered scripture.

<sup>26</sup> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup> In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error Romans 1:26-27.

While these verses seem to address homosexuality, they have been widely debated in both their intent and on what subject matter they are addressing. Was Paul referring to homosexuality and homosexual acts in general? Or was the specific act of pederasty, as used by the Greeks, the target of the missive? The actions involved with pederasty had come to be seen as barbaric by many non-Greek cultures if only because it involved citizens and was not restricted to slaves or other less desirable members of society. In other words, Paul's words might have been a response to an

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<sup>74</sup> Leviticus 18:22 states "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it *is* abomination." This falls into the list of commandments given to Moses yet are lesser known than the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 of the King James Version of the Bible.

immediate, local situation, not a general admonishment of homosexuality in general.

Early Christians reading Paul came to their own conclusions about what he meant. In the fourth century CE, Archbishop John Chrysostom stated outright that Paul was referring to all homosexuals. Chrysostom went on to say that homosexual acts were not only a sin, but also an abomination worse than murder.<sup>75</sup>

Chrysostom's attack against the homosexual lifestyle came at a significant time, as the new Christian religion was rapidly finding acceptance and growing in power in the Roman world. In the same century that Chrysostom wrote on homosexuality, the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great came to power, and he would promote Christianity in his empire. Prior to his rule Christianity was seen as an illegal practice. In addition to becoming a reference to the biblical tale of Daniel in the lion's den, the term "throw the Christians to the lions" is one that was based on Roman attitudes towards Christianity in the decades before Constantine became emperor. While actually being fed to lions was never corroborated, prior to Constantine Christians were executed with shocking regularity and the fledgling faith was struggling to find a place in the Roman Empire where they could practice in peace.<sup>76</sup>

Constantine was born the son of a soldier who would later become the western Caesar, who at the time was the second in command, or deputy emperor, to the individual who was in charge of the western provinces of Rome. Constantine would

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<sup>75</sup> Mark D. Smith, "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer 1996), 225-227.

<sup>76</sup> Daniel 6:1-16.

eventually be recognized as his father's successor and even surpassed his father, becoming Augustus of the west, which was a title used for the emperors at the time. In essence, the Roman Empire had two rulers, a western Augustus and an eastern Augustus, with the eastern Augustus being the emperor of the whole empire. However, there was much competition for the title of emperor at the same time. Constantine was emperor of the West, which included territories of Spain, Gaul, and portions of Britain, but others sought to replace him.<sup>77</sup>

Despite his rule being confirmed by Galerius, the Emperor of the East, others sought to discredit Constantine's title. Another would-be emperor, Maximian, also claimed the title of Augustus. Maximian rose to power in the southern half of the Roman Empire and had a long-standing grudge with Galerius and Constantine. Galerius attempted to quell Maximian by sending an army to stop the insurrection, but the army used to be under the command of Maximian's father and was still loyal to his family. Rather than attack Maximian, the army instead quickly imprisoned their commander and joined forces with Maximian.<sup>78</sup>

Constantine moved to block Maximian, and soon the forces of the two men faced each other over the river Tiber. Maximian's forces outnumbered Constantine's two to one at the time, and the subsequent encounter would come to be called the Battle of Milvian Bridge (312 CE). The winner would retain the title of Augustus, and the loser would likely die. The night before the battle, Constantine had a dream

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<sup>77</sup> Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978), 5.

<sup>78</sup> Bowder, 18.

where he saw the symbol of Jesus of Nazareth, and a divine figure came to him and said, “with this sign, you shall be victorious.” The symbol, called the Chi Rho, was carved into every shield in Constantine’s army, and though the battle was fierce, the army of Constantine was victorious. Following Jesus, Constantine won, and the chief rival was removed.<sup>79</sup>

By his actions after the battle, Constantine was surely glad to be rid of his nemesis, but he also seemed to acknowledge his debt to Jesus. With his conquest of Maximian’s forces, Constantine had his foe’s body fished out of the river, decapitated, and paraded through the streets before engaging in a yearlong propaganda campaign against Maximian to help cement his power and also to discredit everything Maximian did while in power. This was a common play amongst conquerors as getting the populace onto your side is essential in preventing revolts and securing the bower base. One of the things that Constantine failed to do upon his victory, though, was pay homage at the temple of Jupiter. This was seen as eschewing the old religions in favor for a new belief in Christianity, which he seemed to think had been behind his victory.<sup>80</sup>

In 313 CE, Constantine met with his fellow emperor, now a man named Licinius, in the city of Milan. The subsequent publication of the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity and returned property that had been seized from the Church during the persecutions, helped to reshape Christian identity and the place of

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<sup>79</sup> Lars Brownworth, “12 Byzantine Rulers” (lecture, Stony Brook School [grades 7-12]).

<sup>80</sup> Brownworth, lecture.

Christians in the Roman Empire. Christians felt they could not put other gods before Jesus, and, prior to the Edict of Milan, Christians were persecuted for this with no legal recourse. With these changes, they were accepted and could participate in Roman society.<sup>81</sup> The Edict of Milan underscored that Constantine believed that not just Christians, but all religions should be able to practice their faith without oppression (except some suspect edicts against the Jewish faith).

A good example of Constantine's devotion to Christianity was the role it played in the construction of his new capital, Constantinople. Constantine wanted to build a capital city that would cement the Eastern and Western Roman Empire as a cohesive whole and would allow for the emperor to make his presence felt among both. The former Greek city of Byzantium, a small fishing village in Constantine's time, was transformed to become the new eastern capitol of Constantinople. The Christian Church of the Holy Apostles was founded in this new city, built over a former site once dedicated to the Roman god Aphrodite. Built over a pagan temple, this new Christian church put Christianity at the heart of his new capital, which was the new symbol of Roman power. The Roman Empire had become firmly and thoroughly Christian at this point. And with that change, Christianity began to enforce its own laws and beliefs against those they saw as unworthy or sinners including those they classified as homosexuals, and even those who had been accused as submissive to male partners as an attempt to emasculate those in position of power in

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<sup>81</sup> John B. Firth, *Constantine the Great: The Reorganisation of the Empire and the Triumph of the Church* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), 56-57.

the Roman political and military orders.<sup>82</sup>

How the early Christians understood their faith was shaped during this time of change, and their views on homosexuality were just one part of a larger shift in Christian thought. Constantine's son, Constantius II, was a devout Christian when he took the title of Caesar and later Augustus upon the death of his father. He would eventually share rule with his cousin Julian, who would succeed him after his death in 361 CE. While Constantine's rule was one that was often shown to be a template for religious tolerance and acceptance, Constantius II's rule was one marked by religious oppression and harsh edicts against non-Christians.<sup>83</sup> In fact, under Constantius II the laws of Leviticus were again brought to the forefront, and the emperor would make decisions based on religious practices as defined in the Old Testament rather than accepting alternative views or trying to understand the traditions of non-Christian citizens. This meant that those who were classified as pagans found themselves on the wrong side of the law. Religious groups accepted in the empire had swung a full one hundred and eighty degrees in less than four decades, and now the formerly outlawed Christians were outlawing non-Christians.<sup>84</sup> It was during this time that Archbishop John Chrysostom, who had such strong views about homosexuality, began his training as a young member of the Church.

Imperial laws specifically addressed homosexuality. In this environment, since homosexuality was considered an abomination in Leviticus, this interpretation

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<sup>82</sup> Firth, 125-129

<sup>83</sup> Firth, 305.

<sup>84</sup> Firth, 332.

influenced churchmen and lawmakers, and the emperors responded in kind. Constantius II and his brother Constans concurrently ruled portions of the Roman Empire, and both decreed that homosexuality was a capital offense. These new laws were aimed at those who “marry a man as a man would marry a woman,” indicating that the primary focus was against same-sex legal unions and not the act of homosexuality itself.<sup>85</sup>

With the laws in Leviticus stating, “if a man lay with a man as he would a woman, then he is an abomination,” exactly where would the line be drawn for a punishable offense of homosexuality? Strictly speaking, the statement in Leviticus would indicate that a crime has not been committed until the act of sodomy has commenced, or at least a sexual act between two individuals has occurred. This crime could be committed out of the public eye. Prohibitions on homosexuality can be found in later laws, which focused on relationship status or non-Christian civil ceremonies of same sex couples that gave them married status, but these laws made no mention of sodomy or other sexual acts that might lead to capital punishment.<sup>86</sup> In other words, the crime of homosexuality began to encompass more than just the sex act itself. Male couples, especially when married, were in breach of the law. This was exacerbated by a decree from Emperor Valentinian II in the year 390 CE. Valentinian’s decree stated that any man who was “acting the part of a woman” was in violation of the law. However, exactly what “acting the part of a woman” meant

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<sup>85</sup> Firth, 345.

<sup>86</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 119.

was unclear and led to many issues of interpretation of the law. It was hard to tell if the decree described a domestic role or a sexual one or both. It might even refer to a man who was simply effeminate. The punishment for being found in violation of Valentinian II's decree was to be burned alive.<sup>87</sup>

Despite their severity, these laws could be hard to enforce and that could often lead to couples expressing themselves as life-long friends or even related in order to avoid drawing the stigma of the local powers. Often it fell to the local governor to handle capital punishments, and with governors being responsible for enormous provinces (some provinces were the size of modern European countries), this was a difficult task to accomplish. Thus, homosexuals rarely faced such extreme punishments and continued to violate these strict imperial decrees so long as they remained on the fringes of civilization. The trick was to avoid being *seen*.<sup>88</sup>

These strict laws aimed potentially at even effeminate men—not just the sex-act between two men—and carried particularly strict punishments, but were hard to enforce, would be the law of the land until the western part of the Roman Empire disintegrated in the fifth century CE. The eastern portion of the Roman Empire would survive until the mid-1400s, but in the west, there was chaos. Rome was generally accepting of immigrants from the Germanic tribes and other “barbarians” residing in adjacent lands. These migrants had a dual allegiance—one to their tribe

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<sup>87</sup> Donald Mader, “The Entimos Pais of Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10”, *Studies in Homosexuality*, Vol XII: Homosexuality and Religion and Philosophy, eds. Wayne Dynes & Stephen Donaldson (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1992), 224.

<sup>88</sup> Mader, 228.

and the other to Rome. Many would join with invaders against Rome, and thus the empire began to rot from within even as it was attacked from without.<sup>89</sup> It is hard to imagine how laws about sexual identity could still carry weight in such a chaotic environment.

Due to the chaos of the time and lack of centralized governments, fringe beliefs were once again given leeway so long as obvious and public displays were avoided, especially in territories directly controlled by the provincial governments or their Christian representatives. Homosexual men could live their lives without experiencing significant persecution, and many homosexual Romans did so by moving back into Western Europe where their practices were more tolerated and often even ignored. There, due to political instability, homosexuality continued without notable persecution until the ninth century C.E., when Charlemagne united much of Western Europe under a decidedly Christian government that was not tolerant toward homosexuality.<sup>90</sup>

Yet, while the power of Rome eventually dissolved in the western part of Europe, a unifying force was gaining in strength, and that force was the Christian Church. This unifying role of the Church was how Christian views on homosexuality later became the norm in Western European cultures. During these transition years, the Church sought to reform and convert the Gauls and barbarians that had conquered

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<sup>89</sup> Warren Johansson, "Whosoever Shall Say to His Brother, Racha", *Studies in Homosexuality* Vol. XII: Homosexuality and Religion and Philosophy, eds. Wayne Dynes & Stephen Donaldson (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1992) 212.

<sup>90</sup> Brownworth, lecture.

Italy and other parts of Western Europe. While tensions in the Church arose that would lead to an official break between the Church in the east and the west, Christian views on homosexuality were not a point of contention.<sup>91</sup>

Maintaining the mindset of Christians from the fourth century through the dissolution of the western half of the Roman Empire, both churches, east and west, would continue to openly condemn homosexuals to death throughout the Middle Ages. The act of sexually consummating a homosexual relationship was seen as a violation of biblical law and, in regions where Christianity held sway, governments would often carry out extreme punishments. Often this would mean that the individual was outcast from society or put to death. Christian governments were decidedly not forgiving or lenient when Christian laws were violated.<sup>92</sup>

One way some of the Christian faith used to get around the idea of homosexuality being a sin was to implement the rite of adelphopoiesis, which was incorporated and used by the Orthodox Christian faith from the earliest records of the religion up to about the fourteenth century C.E., with modern uses of the ceremonies being a sort of resurgence. The rite was one that was used in place of various pagan rituals that involved the concept of “blood-brothers” or other nontraditional unions and thus would not qualify for ceremonies like marriage.

Some scholars have argued that this is what was used when homosexual couples wanted to be joined but did not qualify for being married due to the same-sex

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<sup>91</sup> Firth, 350.

<sup>92</sup> “Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 2357 Catholic Church”, Scborromeo.org, 29 October 1951, Retrieved 12 November 2019.

nature of their relationship. John Boswell stated that with the lack of similar rights in the western Catholic traditions, this is a clear indication of the lingering mindsets of Ancient Greece reemerging and finding allowances for the same sex relationships which was such an accepted part of the culture. Others believe that this ceremony was only to help cement and formalize the bonds between very close friends and no romance was instilled in the joining. Scholar Robin Darling Young falls into the latter school of thought and said this after undergoing the ceremony with fellow scholar Susan Ashbrook Harvey:

This is a subject about which I have the good fortune to speak not merely as a scholar or an observer, but as a participant. Nine years ago, I was joined in devout sisterhood to another woman, apparently in just such a ceremony as Boswell claims to elucidate in his book. The ceremony took place during a journey to some of the Syrian Christian communities of Turkey and the Middle East, and the other member of this same-sex union was my colleague Professor Susan Ashbrook Harvey of Brown University. During the course of our travels we paid a visit to St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem, the residence of the Syrian Orthodox archbishop. There our host, Archbishop Dionysius Behnam Jajaweh, remarked that since we had survived the rigors of Syria and Eastern Turkey in amicable good humor, we two women must be good friends indeed. Would we like to be joined as sisters the next morning after the bishop's Sunday liturgy in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre? Intrigued, we agreed, and on a Sunday in late June of 1985, we followed the bishop and a monk through the Old City to a side chapel in the Holy Sepulchre where, according to the Syrian Orthodox, lies the actual tomb of Jesus. After the liturgy, the bishop had us join our right hands together and he wrapped them in a portion of his garment. He pronounced a series of prayers over us, told us that we were united as sisters, and admonished us not to quarrel. Ours was a sisterhood stronger than blood, confirmed in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he said, and since it was a spiritual union, it would last beyond the grave.

Our friendship has indeed endured and flourished beyond the accidental association of two scholars sharing an interest in the Syriac-speaking Christianity of late antiquity. The blessing of the Syrian Orthodox Church was a precious instance of our participation in the life of an ancient and noble Christian tradition. Although neither of us took the trouble to investigate the

subject, each privately assumed that the ritual of that summer was some Christian descendant of an adoption ceremony used by the early church to solemnify a state-of friendship-which comes highly recommended in the Christian tradition (“Henceforth I call you not servants . . . but I have called you friends.” [John15:15]). If this were all that Professor Boswell were claiming to have “discovered,” neither I nor anyone else would be likely to dispute his findings. It seems reasonable to assume that ceremonies like the one Susan Ashbrook Harvey and I went through continue to take place in those eastern churches that preserve the rite of adoption (adelphopoiesis) for friends. In fact, scholars of the liturgy have known for years of these rituals.

But any such modest claim is not what Boswell has in mind. He claims that the “brother/sister-making” rituals found in manuscripts and certain published works are ancient ceremonies whose cryptic (or, in current argot, “encoded”) purpose has been to give ecclesiastical blessing to homosexual or lesbian relationships, thus making them actual nuptial ceremonies. This startling claim is certainly far from the reality of the ceremony in which we participated nine years ago.<sup>93</sup>

Another way Christianity used its power and control in order to oppress and repress homosexuality was the Christianization of both the history and mythology of European cultures that had preceded Christianity by millennia. An example of this is the modification of the Zeus and Ganymede tale from lovers to a force and abductee relationship. Due to the issues of adjusting historic myths that involved foreign gods and activities that were seen as counter to their religious views, Christian scholars took a tale of lovers and changed it into something more sinister and even brutal. The original myth, as best can be reconstructed, was passed down by Homer in the Iliad with the translation reading:

... and godlike Ganymede  
 who was born the best-looking mortal man of them all,  
 and because of his beauty the gods wafted him aloft

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<sup>93</sup> Robin Darling Young, “Gay Marriage: Reimagining Church History,” *First Things* 47, (November 1994): 43-48.

to be Zeus's cup-bearer and dwell among the immortals.<sup>94</sup>

The reinterpretation of the myth is something that was more of a conceptualization. Based on the popular culture of his time, the painter Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn was contracted to paint "The Rape of Ganymede" later renamed or more accurately interpreted to "The Abduction of Ganymede" which was completed in the year 1635 C.E. This painting was one of distressing subject matter and involved a monstrous eagle taking a depiction of Ganymede, given infant like traits and decidedly child-like features, and flying off with the subject. Rembrandt worked as a decidedly Christian painter and the subject matter that his work would have drawn inspiration from what would have been the Christian interpretations of the various myths and history.

It can be interpreted that the modification of this myth was a direct attack against the Greek practice of pederasty. With this practice, a young Greek boy (usually a preteen on the cusp of what was considered manhood) would be chosen by an older Greek man to be subject to a period of grooming and possible sexual encounters. The point of this practice was seen as a rite of passage for the boy and even if the concept of it has changed given modern sensibilities, the practice was a common one and accepted by Ancient Greek society as part of the norm.

The refuge of homosexuality in Europe, therefore, would eventually fade away. The unified western Roman Empire devolved into smaller, petty kingdoms

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<sup>94</sup> Homer, and Peter Green, *The Iliad: A New Translation by Peter Green* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 374.

where local rulers had a lot of power and paid attention to the practices and customs of subjects. These rulers had all the powers of an emperor but for their fiefdom or kingdom and thus fringe activities such as homosexuality were no longer tolerated.<sup>95</sup> The power of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches had a significant impact as well. Even if rulers were not particularly devout, they were forced to pay lip service to and accommodate the Church. Given that most of Europe was Christian, rulers often would bow to the whims of the Church.<sup>96</sup>

With the Christian faith acting as a unifying force across Western Europe during the Middle Ages, homosexuality would remain on the fringes of society. For nearly two thousand years the Christian faith held sway across Europe, and there were strict punishments for homosexuals who were caught in breach of Christian law. A faith founded on forgiveness and acceptance ruled with an iron fist and God help anyone who tried to stand in its way.

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<sup>95</sup> “Catechism”.

<sup>96</sup> Michah J. Murray, “What the Christian Right Gets Wrong About Sin”, *The Huffington Post*, 2 April 2014.

### **Conclusion**

“Some say my loving you is wrong, but I love you because it feels so right.”

--Unknown

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Tension over homosexuality regularly makes headlines in the United States. In 1998, a college student named Matthew Shephard was beaten to death because he was homosexual. Indeed, homosexuality is punishable by death in some countries even today. Even questions like who can use which bathroom led to new laws in North Carolina in 2016. The issue of how societies view and treat homosexuals is nothing new to Western cultures. In fact, homosexuality has been a part of recorded European society since the ancient Greeks. Legends abound about same sex Greek couples who could and would be hailed as heroes. Such tales inundate ancient Greek literature. How accepted was homosexuality back then? And was homosexuality in the ancient world? When?

This thesis examines how the ancient Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians viewed homosexuality and treated homosexuals in antiquity and through the first centuries after the establishment of the Christian church. It seems that the Greeks and the Romans were more concerned about social status and who was dominant in the sex act as opposed to the gender of the participants involved. Similarly, Jews do not appear to have been too concerned about same sex couples or people who showed

affection for others of the same sex. Rather Jewish tradition placed a lot of weight on the act of sex in general. While homosexual sex could be punished by death, this was rare. It was only with the advent of Christianity that homosexuality clearly became stigmatized. As the early Christian community was established, and homosexuality was seen as an abomination, and anyone who showed homosexual tendencies could be punished with death.

The Greeks were quite accepting of a variety of sexual practices, and they were not concerned with the gender of the individuals involved in a relationship beyond the gender discrimination when dealing with matters of authority or power. For the Greeks, it was a question of who the dominant partner was. This dynamic is clear in mythical tales of famous same sex relationships such as those between Heracles and Iolaus, Achilles and Patroclus, and also Zeus and Ganymede. In a sexual relationship, whether it was a heterosexual or homosexual couple, the person who led during the act of sex was often older and understood to be more established in society. Even pederasty, the custom of an older man forming a relationship with or abducting a young boy for the sake of bonding and sexual gratification, and rape were accepted in Greek society. While marriage was supposed to be between a man and a woman, to ensure the continuance of the family line, homosexual relationships were certainly accepted in everyday Greek society.

Like the Greeks, the Romans did not stigmatize homosexuality. In fact, male sexuality was commonly promoted in Roman society, and homosexual relationships were unexceptional, even in politics and the military. Roman society was ruled by a

patriarchy and this was most shown in its acceptance of masculinity as the key defining factor of a male's standing in society. Therefore, it is not unexpected that Romans frowned upon taking the submissive role during the act of sex. In this context, for men it was seen as dishonorable to be on the same end of a sexual act as a woman would be. This could lead to loss of social status unless the man who took on the submissive role during sex was *infamis*, a slave, or raped. In the Roman Empire, the consequence for being the submissive partner was loss of social status: one's reputation, not life, was at stake.

For Jews sodomy and homosexual acts were punishable sins, according to Jewish law. However, in Judaism homosexuality was defined as the act of laying with another man sexually. Jewish law did not have much to say about the act of being in love or having a romantic relationship with a member of the same sex. It did not seem to have caused any social stigma. In other words, Jewish law did not address men who loved one another or were even a couple. It was the sex act itself that was and "abomination" and punishable by death.

While in Judaism the crime of sodomy was punishable by death, capital punishment was rarely implemented, and the evidence required to even bring about such a charge was considered overwhelming. The root of the word sodomy stems from the city of Sodom, and God clearly punished the people who lived in Sodom and Gomorrah. And the citizens of those cities seemingly committed sexual acts that went beyond just homosexual intercourse. While homosexuality, therefore, had a stigma attached to it in the Jewish community, there are examples of Jews who may

well have been known to be homosexual being accepted in Jewish society. After all, Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, lived together in what could be seen as a relationship without drawing the ire of the Jewish community. And King David and Saul's son, Jonathan, "shared a love more pleasing than even that of man and woman."

The early Christians, referencing Leviticus, which can be found in the Old Testament, felt homosexuality was an abomination, but they broadened the category from a man who is found guilty of having sex with another man to potentially any man who appeared effeminate and same-sex couples, even if there was no evidence that their relationship went beyond mentor and protégé. While homosexuality might have escaped notice following the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the west, medieval Christian rulers would subsequently turn to the definition of homosexuality that the early Christians set in the centuries after Jesus' death.

With this review the correlation of the rise of Christianity is clearly one of the primary factors, if not the largest, in the social stigmatization of homosexuality in ancient to medieval Europe. The myths and histories of both Greece and Rome, which was the foundation of European cultures for millennia, were modified and overshadowed by Christian rule and law and the societal shift is quickly apparent and clearly seen.

During the centuries after Jesus' crucifixion, as the early Christian community grew out of a collapsing Roman world, social acceptance of homosexuality became less common and a new norm was created. Members of the early Christian church,

even the apostles, began to establish a new Christian identity, and, basing their opinions on a specific reading of Jewish law, stigmatized homosexuality as an abomination punishable by death. This set them apart from earlier Jewish traditions, not to mention from the pagan Greeks and Romans. This stigma would continue as the Christian Church rose to power and later became such an integral part of European society. As Christianity spread, those allowed to just be themselves were forced to change or hide at risk of death. If a person's sexual identity ran counter to the teachings of the faith, then while under the thumb of Christians, it was wrong to be themselves.

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