

Homosexuality in Botswana and in the Hebrew Bible: An impression

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ABSTRACT

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This paper has two parts: the first offers an impression of how homosexuality is being discussed in the public in Botswana; the second outlines the main theological positions in contemporary debates. From here it goes on to explore the social circumstances that could have given rise to those texts of the Hebrew Bible that allude to some form of sexual activity between members of the same sex. The argument developed in this paper is that the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly or unambiguously condemn either homosexual orientation, or most homosexual behaviour, and indicates that the complexities of the ongoing theological debate on this topic are very much in evidence in Botswana.

1 INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality is both a global and a divisive issue; hotly debated in the media, in private, public and in academic spheres. In all of these contexts religious - including biblical - arguments are often put forward, and it has been claimed not infrequently that the Bible condemns homosexuality. In recent years, however, a number of commentators have argued that biblical grounds for disapproving of homosexuality are ambiguous, even insubstantial (see Helminiak & Spong (1994), Olyan (1994), Vasey (1997) and Nissinen (1998)). References to sexual activity between members of the same sex are, first of all, sparse: two stories of threatened male rape (Gn 19; Jdg 19), two terse laws in Leviticus (Lv 18:22; 20:13) and some statements in the Pauline writings (Rm 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tm 1:10). At a stretch, Jude 7:23 might also qualify. Furthermore, it is necessary to try and understand these references as far as is possible within their literary and social contexts. If no such effort is made, there exists a much greater likelihood that modern interpreters of these texts (blinkerred by their own socio-cultural assumptions) fail to recognise how differently homosexual behaviour has been conceptualised and evaluated in other times and places.

First, I will offer an impression of how homosexuality is being discussed on a public level in Botswana. I am aware that my insight is restricted, due above all to the fact that I am a recent arrival to Botswana.

na. I have, therefore, chosen the word “impression” deliberately. I have confined my account to the perception that can be gleaned from reports in local or national publications, and I acknowledge the limitations of this narrow approach. It is not my intention to say anything definitive about homosexuality, theology and/or Botswana, but rather to formulate a theological contribution to the ongoing debate, in the hope of stimulating more discussion. My assumed audience is Christian (or Christian-influenced), because it is in such contexts that homosexuality is (in my experience) being discussed most prominently in contemporary Botswana. I hope that this contribution is not irrelevant to contexts in other places and religious traditions.

Following on from this, I will outline the main theological positions in contemporary debates and then explore the social circumstances that could have given rise to the texts of the Hebrew Bible that mention some form of sexual activity between members of the same sex. I will argue that the Hebrew Bible does not explicitly or unambiguously condemn either homosexual orientation or most homosexual behaviour; and I will indicate that the complexities of the ongoing theological debate on this topic are very much in evidence in Botswana.

This paper, therefore, has a relatively narrow focus. The texts of the Hebrew Bible feature prominently in Christians’ debates on homosexuality and therefore require elucidation. I will not, however, be examining the New Testament passages relevant to this topic, as this is beyond the scope both of this paper and my expertise. I accept that this could be said to present an incomplete picture. The final three texts cited above all provide discussions of New Testament references. Additional useful readings can be found in the editions by Malcom Macourt (1977) and Timothy Bradshaw (1997).

2 HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE MEDIA IN BOTSWANA: NEWSPAPERS FROM THE EARLY MONTHS OF 2000

Carnal attraction and carnal relations between members of the same sex exist in Botswana as they do all over the world (see Baum (1993) and Parrinder (1980)). Botswana has Zimbabwe on its north-eastern border, and it was at the Harare International Book Show in 1995 that President Robert Mugabe voiced his much publicised anti-homosexual opinions, which have made him a target of gay rights groups internationally. To the south of Botswana, meanwhile, lies the Republic of South Africa, whose 1997 Constitution and Bill of Rights prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (see section 9, subsections 3 and 4). In 1999, the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Bill* went even further and defined “marital status” as including

“same sex relationships... in which the partners share a reciprocal duty of support”.

The polemics surrounding homosexuality, clear already from this contrast, have begun to be in evidence in Botswana's press. In the first five months of the year 2000, homosexuality has been discussed in a variety of ways in several of the major publications. On 8 March 2000 in an article in *The Midweek Sun*, Bashi Letsididi reported on a panel discussion on homosexuality held at the University of Botswana on 2 March 2000. The article describes the contributors as putting forward a range of questions and opinions concerning such matters as whether homosexuality is a matter of biological predisposition or choice. Medical doctor, Dr Evans Tshombela, is cited as calling homosexuality “unchristian, unsocial and undignified”, emblematic of the escalation of sin that has been gathering pace from the time of creation. He argues, furthermore, that homosexuality is alien to African societies, that no African language has an original word for it and that it was invented in the West and subsequently introduced to Africa. Tshepo Motswagole, a lawyer, agrees that homosexuality is sinful and that he supports the point of view of President Robert Mugabe. Professor of Sociology, Neo-Cosmos, however, warns that his opinion is “controversial” and argues that intimate (including sexual) relations between people of the same sex have always been a part of all societies, including African ones and that persecution of homosexuality began between the 14th and 19th centuries when Western societies began to promulgate laws against male-male sexual behaviour. Professor Neo-Cosmos goes on to condemn the persecution of minorities, including on the grounds of sexual orientation, on the basis of human rights. Dr Onalenna Selolwane, the final member of the panel, likewise, likens discrimination against homosexuals to racial discrimination and calls for tolerance and compassion.

The same publication contains another pertinent article: a brief account of the life of “John” (a pseudonym), a 26-year old homosexual man from Molepolole. The article describes John's attraction towards males from an early age, his involvement with girls “just to compromise”, his feelings of guilt and, latterly, his certainty “that there is absolutely nothing wrong with him”. John's relationships with men are described as casual and outside of any committed relationship. The article does not shy away from sexually explicit references and describes the necessity for discretion (“according to the constitution homosexuality is a punishable offence”), as well as his elation at visiting a gay club in South Africa. John refers to himself as “gay not by choice, this is how I was born and this is how I want to live”. The article does not comment on either the rights or wrongs of John's conduct, but does refer to homo-

sexuality as “his condition”, which may be considered pejorative by implication.

On 9 March the *Mmegi Monitor* also published a response to the University of Botswana’s panel discussion. The verdict of journalist Key Dingake is that Botswana’s society is “extremely intolerant”, and that it is “offensive to the democratic principle of tolerance” to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation. He acknowledges that in Botswana homosexuality is only just beginning to be discussed, and is possibly not widely practised. Dingake goes on to predict, however, that public perception of the status of homosexuality will and must change, because “it is fruitless to bury our heads in the sand and hope the issue will remain peripheral for good. In time we will have to confront the issue head on. In time blind prejudice that stigmatises homosexual relations will have to stand up to rational scrutiny”.

On 22 March *The Midweek Sun* published a letter by Rev. Rupert Hambira, Synod Secretary of the United Congregational Church in Southern Africa, replying to the paper’s earlier article. Rev. Hambira states that the article about John was “sensational”, as well as “offensive and irresponsible”. One reason for his opinion is culturally specific: “In our culture, sexual activity is always the domain of responsible adults. It is not something we display openly because it is intimate, personal, and almost sacramental”. Another reason is that the sexual relations described by John are of a kind that lacks meaning, love and affection, which “those of us in the church would find ... very difficult to even begin to listen to...” He elaborates: “Responsibility to each other and to the society is a ground rule that binds all people in all relationships, whether they are gay or straight. In this way, the article perpetuates stereotypes that do harm to others and to the understanding of what it means to be in a committed relationship”. Rev. Hambira, then, is not offended by homosexual orientation in itself, but rather by John’s manner of reporting on his behaviour, and by promiscuity and sexual irresponsibility in general.

On 10 May *The Botswana Gazette* contained an anonymous confession, signed “Happy gay”. The 20-year old male writer recalls his effeminate tendencies from a young age and concludes, “I feel being in the closet for my lifetime wouldn’t help”. He describes his relationship with another male as “we treat each other like husband and wife” and, like John, claims that he was “born like that”. While he abhors male prostitution, he calls for tolerance where sexual orientation is concerned.

A mood of tolerance is reflected, too, in the final article I came across in *Mmegi/The Reporter* of 19-25 May 2000. Here it is reported that *Ditshwanelo* (The Botswana Centre for Human Rights) received a Felipa de Souza Award in New York, for its contribution to raising awareness of gay, lesbian and bisexual issues in Botswana. In May 1998

Ditshwanelo held a workshop, which led to the formation of *Legabibo* (“Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana”). A human rights charter was produced and adopted later that same year. *Ditshwanelo* and *Legabibo* continue to facilitate public awareness of gay human rights issues.

All of these publications taken together, suggest that there is a wide spectrum of opinions in Botswana regarding homosexuality (as is indeed the case in many other parts of the world).

3 HOMOSEXUALITY AND THEOLOGY

David Sollis (2000) has identified five distinct theological approaches to the issue of homosexuality. The *first* is the conservative approach, as reflected in, for example the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons” (published by the Catholic Truth Society 1986). According to this approach homosexuality is wrong and rejected unequivocally. Reasons are often derived from such texts as Genesis 1:27. Some advocates of the conservative position distinguish between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts, and regard the former as morally neutral but the latter as reprehensible and unnatural. According to this position only two vocations exist for the Christian person: marriage, or celibate single life.

The *second* is the liberal approach, which tries to balance scriptural evidence with recent findings and conclusions of the biological and social sciences. Sollis cites as an example the statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England (*Issues in Human Sexuality*, Church House Publishing 1991). Most advocates of this position would say that the lifelong, monogamous union between a man and woman is the Christian ideal but that loving and faithful partnerships between members of the same sex can also be ways to understanding and growing in God’s love.

The *third* is the radical approach. The emphasis with this position is on the quality of a relationship, as opposed to the nature of sexual acts. Sexuality is morally neutral: a loving relationship between two men, or two women, therefore, is no less a blessing than a loving relationship between a man and a woman. The *fourth* is the lesbian and gay approach. This position has affinities with other theologies of the oppressed, such as liberation theology. It is based on personal experience (see Griffin 2000). The *fifth* approach is that of queer theology, which emerged in the 1990s and represents a coalition of solidarity among all those who defy heterosexual normativity. This theology is essentially postmodern and includes also the voices of the bisexual and trans-gendered.

It can be inferred from the newspaper articles summarised above that the first four positions are represented in Botswana. This testifies to a diversity that is sometimes ignored by the media in the West. Sollis has

demonstrated this with reference to the British media's coverage of the Lambeth Conference of 1998. At this conference a liberal position towards homosexuality was proposed, but some bishops, particularly from non-Western countries, felt that this formed part of a Western - more particularly a colonial - agenda. The British media contributed to the impression of a divide of "conservative southern (or 'Third World') bishops versus liberal Western bishops" (Sollis 2000:110). Of the 146 bishops who signed a pastoral statement for lesbian and gay Christians, however, two were from Central and six from Southern Africa. While, admittedly, these numbers are not considerable, they do affirm the general impression arising also from Botswana's newspapers that attitudes towards homosexuality in Africa are not universally hostile.

4 HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

Next, I would like to show why there is justification for a less hostile attitude towards homosexuality. Certainly, the scriptural evidence of the Hebrew Bible where sexual acts between members of the same sex is concerned is ambiguous and complex (see Stiebert & Walsh 2001). Those who claim that homosexuality is wrong "because it says so in the Bible", ought to have first, a firm understanding of what is meant by "homosexuality"; secondly, a good grasp of what is said in the Bible; and thirdly, reasons for their outright rejection. To address the first point and give a brief definition: homosexuality is the predisposition of some individuals to be sexually attracted to persons of the same gender as opposed to those of the opposite gender. Sexual activity may or may not eventuate from that attraction.

In contemporary discourses the term "homosexual" refers primarily to orientation, not to behaviour. The Hebrew Bible has no word for homosexuality. Sexual attraction between two women (lesbianism) receives no mention. (Would this indicate that lesbianism - as it is not prohibited - is permissible?) There is no allusion either to any range of homosexual expressions. The close and affectionate relationship between David and Jonathan (1 Sm 18:1-4; 20:16-17, 41-42; 2 Sm 1:26) has sometimes (in my view wrongly) been described as homoerotic (see Nissinen 1998:55, note 93). Along with Martti Nissinen I would say that while such a relationship *is* conceivable, the recognition of homoeroticism in the few (less than explicit) biblical passages is to some extent due to a projection of modern Western perceptions of exchanges of even non-erotic physical affection between men:

"In the contemporary Western world, men's mutual expressions of feelings are more restricted than they were in the biblical world. Men's homosociability apparently was not part of the sexual taboo

in the biblical world any more than it is in today's Christian and Islamic cultures around the Mediterranean. Physical expressions of feelings belong to homosocial contacts and seem strange to Western people, who understand the eroticism of gestures in their own way, categorizing people accordingly as homosexuals and heterosexuals" (Nissinen 1998:56).

I imagine many readers of the story of David and Jonathan in African contexts also do not perceive any homoerotic undertones.

What *is* mentioned (though neither frequently nor insistently) is some form of sexual act (possibly anal penetration) between two men. In the two biblical narratives of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 threatening men demand "to know" male guests. The sexual nature of this knowledge is clear. What is at issue here is primarily (gang) rape and the consequent humiliation of male visitors. Neither text suggests, however, that the men threatening rape are homosexual. As Rictor Norton points out with regard to Genesis 19, "Either the inhabitants of Sodom are heterosexual, or Lot is incredibly stupid to offer them his virgin daughters" (Norton 1977b:58)! In Judges 19, furthermore, the Levite's concubine is sexually abused, which seems to suggest - though admittedly not inevitably - that the men of Gibeah are also heterosexual. What *is* strongly condemned in Genesis 19 (and in the similar story of Jdg 19, too) is not so much the men's sexuality (homosexual or otherwise) but their brutality and infringements of codes of hospitality. While the name "Sodom" usually brings the word "sodomy" into the mind of the modern reader, the earliest interpretations of Genesis 19 in fact do not emphasise the sexual nature of the sin of Sodom. There are frequent references to Sodom in the Hebrew Bible, but when the city's sins are described in more detail, it is pride, the ill treatment of foreigners and judicial offences that receive attention.

Let us look at Ezekiel 16:49, for example, a chapter filled with obscene sexual images - which may well be the reason for the rabbinical prohibition of public readings of this chapter (Meg 4:10). Sodom is here condemned for pride, social injustice and lack of hospitality - not for sodomy. The verse reads, "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy" (NIV). True, Ezekiel 16:50 reads, "They were haughty and did detestable things before me" (NIV). The word for "detestable things" is from the Hebrew noun ?????, sometimes translated "abomination". This word can indeed refer to sexual transgression, but is not confined to such a usage. The fact remains that Sodom's sin is not explicitly defined as sodomy, even in a chapter that could justifiably be described as pornographic. In the apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solo-*

mon, too, it is xenophobia that is cited as the sin of Sodom. In chapter 19 there is mention of those who “practised a more bitter hatred of strangers”, who “refused to receive strangers when they came to them” and were “stricken also with loss of sight - just as were those at the door of the righteous man” (RSV), which (it can be assumed with relative certainty) is a reference to Lot and the men of Sodom. In the New Testament also it is immediately following travel instructions in the event of encountering inhospitable citizens who do not receive the disciples, that Jesus alludes to Sodom (Mt 10:15; Lk 10:12). There is no mention of either homosexual orientation or practice. The authors of Ezekiel and the *Wisdom of Solomon* most probably knew the story of the attempted sexual assault of the men of Sodom. The fact that they do not refer to sexual relations between men as one of the sins of Sodom suggests that within the original social context what was at issue was not *primarily* sexual immorality, but violence, arrogance and disregard for hospitality. As Nissinen explains, sexual transgression becomes the focus only of later interpretations, such as those of the Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, Philo and the Qur’an (Nissinen 1998:93-95).

Alongside the narratives of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are two succinct laws in Leviticus. These could be said to be direct and unequivocal. A counter-argument, however, which incorporates a detailed discussion of Hebrew idiom, is proposed by Saul Olyan. His conclusion is more cautious:

“Did Israelites abhor male couplings, as has been generally assumed up to the present? Certainly the evidence of the Hebrew Bible is insufficient to support this view. Such a generalization is more easily defended for adultery, incest, and human-animal couplings, all of which are prohibited in legal materials outside of the Holiness Source” (Olyan 1994:205).

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both prohibit that a man lie with another man (literally) “the lying of a woman”. Such an act is ??????. The latter law prescribes the death penalty for both men practising such an act. What precisely “the lying of a woman” means and whether the prohibition should be extended to comprise a comprehensive range of homosexual expressions, is, however, elusive. Jerome Walsh, for instance, has argued persuasively that the laws have in view *only* anal intercourse between males, but no other male-male sexual expressions (Walsh 2001).

To summarise briefly: we have provided a brief definition of homosexuality and found that the Hebrew Bible has nothing to say about homosexual orientation. It contains four passages where a sexual act between men is mentioned. The narrative passages condemn the men

threatening such an act. What is condemned above all, however, is the threat of rape and humiliation, which is indicative of a most serious breach of hospitality. We have seen, too, that some form of male-male sexual act is prohibited in Leviticus and, as it incurs the death penalty, we can assume that whatever precisely it was, it was very seriously condemned. As even the most recent and detailed linguistic analyses admit to the elusiveness of the Hebrew idiom of these laws (an idiom which occurs in these two terse legal texts only) let us probe the probable reasons for the prohibitions in order to assess whether the laws still hold the same relevance and significance as they did in earlier times.

Four main reasons have been suggested for the existence of these two laws. The first proposes that the reason male-male sexual acts were rejected by the Israelites is due to their association with idolatrous practices (see Norton 1977a). As Olyan points out, this is probably the least convincing of the arguments, because it relies on a narrow and unreliable translation of the word ????? as well as the (widely rejected) idea that Leviticus 18:21 refers to child sacrifice to an alleged god called Molek. Idolatry in the Judaic tradition is, of course, a cardinal sin and an association with idolatry has been used to account also for other legal stipulations such as the dietary laws. The dietary laws are, however, considered obsolete by most Christians and a connection with idolatry might therefore be said to be insufficient to justify the rejection of homosexuality on the grounds of Leviticus 18 and 20. It has thus been argued that the prohibition “do not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Ex 23:19; 34:26; Dt 14:21) is derived from the rejection of such a practice in Canaanite worship. As a consequence of this law (mentioned three times while the prohibition for a man to lie with another man occurs twice) orthodox Jews to this day do not consume dairy and meat products in one meal. Most Christians, on the other hand, do not follow such dietary restrictions.

The *second* reason centres on the idea that homosexuality is “unnatural”. First of all, a thought: would something *truly* “unnatural” indeed be prohibited against? Holding our hands in the fire is unnatural behaviour but it would be nonsensical to have a law that says, “You shall not hold your hands in the fire”. Instead, there are laws against adultery and sexual acts between men precisely because adulterous and homosexual acts *are* practised - possibly because for some people they are considered either “natural”, or at least very real desires. It can and has been argued that they are *only* the desires of unnatural people – but it none the less appears to be the case that “natural” and “unnatural” are relative designations.

Mary Douglas (1966) argued that the ancient Israelites designated as ????? all those things (be it creatures, substances or activities) that

defied classification, or that were not proper to their kind. The designation, therefore, belonged to a particular worldview or system of ideas. She explains, for instance, that the pig is deemed unsuitable for consumption not because pigs are somehow inherently disgusting, or because pig flesh is more liable to carry diseases, but because pigs do not fulfil the particular standards that define a “proper” or “clean” land animal. Unlike goats or cows the pig has a cloven hoof but does not chew cud, therefore it is deficient (Lv 11:3-7). Likewise, shellfish are deficient because proper sea-dwelling creatures have scales and fins but shellfish do not. As a result, shellfish are not proper to their kind and therefore not fit for consumption (Lv 11:9-12).

Following the line of this argument, a “proper” man is sexually active, a “proper” woman sexually receptive. A sexual act between two men is envisaged as penetrative and in such a scenario one man (namely, the receptive partner) takes the role that is in a heterosexual sexual act reserved (and deemed proper) for the woman. A man who is behaving “like a woman” has transgressed a boundary; this is improper and therefore ????? (see Stiebert & Walsh 2001). If we accept this reason, we have to remind ourselves that what is labelled “natural” or “unnatural” is defined within the terms of a system of ideas. As mentioned above, the naturalness or otherwise of homosexual acts is subject to cultural relativism: some homosexual activities *were* sanctioned in, for instance, classical Greece and ancient Rome (see Dover 1989, Winkler 1990 and Nissinen 1998). Also (as with the idolatry argument), if our reason is that the Hebrew Bible deems sexual activities between two men unnatural, and if this scriptural basis is relevant for all places and all times, then all sorts of other matters prohibited or labelled ????? must be taken seriously, too. Again, such laws as those prohibiting cutting the hair on the side of the head (Lv 19:27), growing more than one crop in one field, or wearing garments of more than one fibre (Lv 19:19) are adhered to by orthodox Jews, but not by most Christians. The question one must ask, then, is: can Christians be so selective? We can, after all, also find laws to prohibit inter-marriage between ethnic groups (Dt 7; Neh 13) and laws sanctioning (or rather prescribing) the stoning to death of a disobedient son (Dt 21:18-21). If we say that *some* laws are obsolete and others not; or that some are moral laws of continuing relevance, and others (such as some of the purity laws) mechanical laws that have ceased to be significant and enforceable, we have to be very clear about our criteria for determining which are which and why.

The *third* proposed reason for the laws of Leviticus is that sexual activities between two men were prohibited because they cannot procure procreation. This argument could be extended to account for other laws in Leviticus 18. As Olyan (1994) explains, incest and adultery can be

interpreted as obscuring Israelite lines of descent; while bestial acts, as well as the offering of one's children to foreign gods, likewise waste Israelite seed. Also prohibited is intercourse with a menstruating woman – this, too, is very unlikely to result in conception. If this is our rationale and we justify the legislation on the grounds that semen is being wasted, then the implication has to be that *all* sexual activity that does not maximise conception is also improper. This would mean that the use of contraception is unacceptable and would also prohibit masturbation and sexual acts within marriage during times when a woman cannot conceive or when she is past the age of conceiving. There are indeed Christians who do uphold these views. For the majority of Christians, however, who do not: is this argument for prohibiting homosexuality acceptable? Are *any* of the reasons for the laws in Leviticus cited so far acceptable?

The *fourth* reason, which strikes me as closest to the mark for accounting for the emergence of the laws of Leviticus, concerns purity and pollution (a theme central to Lv as a whole). It has been argued that mixing of defiling emissions is at issue in several sexual proscriptions. Mixing the semen of two men, or the semen of humans and animals, or semen and menstrual blood might all be said to be particularly contaminating. Both semen and menstrual blood are defiling as it is: when mixed they could be said to constitute a double threat. Again, if this is our reason for rejecting homosexuality, then the purity laws cannot be followed so selectively and a range of other complicated prohibitions must be taken into account also. Homosexuality would according to this stance be considered objectionable not because it is morally reprehensible (any more than menstruation is morally reprehensible), but because it is defiling.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Recent articles published in mainstream newspapers of Botswana suggest that homosexuality is being discussed there as it is in many other parts of the world. Although the media in Britain, for instance, has sometimes contributed to the perception that the debate on the topic of homosexuality beyond the Western world is univocally hostile, newspapers of Botswana indicate that there exist a variety of points of view. There are people in Botswana who maintain a conservative position with regard to homosexuality, but there are also more liberal voices, as well as nationals of Botswana who have publicly professed their homosexual orientation (though anonymously).

Focusing on texts of the Hebrew Bible where some form of sexual activity between members of the same sex is mentioned, it emerges that there is actually very little to go on. Homosexuality, a sexual orientation whereby individuals are attracted to members of the same rather than the

opposite gender (which is how this word is generally understood in contemporary debates) is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. There are, however, four texts that refer pejoratively to sexual acts between men. (Lesbianism receives no mention.) The two narrative texts in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 both concern the threat of male rape. As is suggested by the earliest allusions to Sodom in the books of Ezekiel and The Wisdom of Solomon (as well as in the Gospels), Sodom's sin was primarily associated not with sodomy but with arrogance, violence and above all a lack of hospitality. The two narratives may tell us that raping a man is wrong, but they do not tell us anything about sexual orientation. The two legal texts of Leviticus 18 and 20, meanwhile, are terse and the Hebrew idiom is elusive. When attempting to explore the social contexts that may have given rise to these laws it becomes apparent that scriptural reasons for rejecting homosexuality tend to be highly selective.

The Hebrew Bible does not have a preoccupation with sexual acts between members of the same gender: there are far more references to dietary regulations than to anything that has any relevance to the debate on homosexuality. The reasons for the two laws that do exist have accounted for the rejection of homosexual acts by pointing to associations with idolatrous practices, to the idea that semen is being wasted, to a blurring of boundaries and to purity concerns. All of these reasons pose some problems for all but the most fundamentalist of Christians – and even they tend to be somewhat selective about which laws of Leviticus to abide by and which not.

My aim has been above all to draw attention to the fact that the debate on homosexuality with all its complexities is alive and well in Botswana. I have tried to highlight some of these complexities from a theological perspective with special reference to texts of the Hebrew Bible and by drawing attention to the importance of attempting to understand these texts within a social framework. My hope is that the debate will continue and that such notions as care and compassion for the socially vulnerable (for which there is considerable support in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) will not be neglected.

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