Judaism and then for Pauline Christianity. The designation of homosexual relations as an "abomination" or "abominable crime" in medieval and modern sacral and legal texts echoes the wording of the Old Testament.

The complex web of prohibitions recorded in the Book of Leviticus has defied full explanation from the standpoint of comparative religion. Recently influential among social scientists (though not among Biblical scholars) has been the interpretation of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Purity and Danger, London, 1967), who views the abominations as part of a concern with the boundaries of classification categories, strict adherence to which attests one’s purity in relation to divinity.

ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

According to the French Catholic Orientalist Louis Massignon (1883–1962), the Abrahamic religions are the three major faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—that look to the patriarch Abraham as their spiritual father. In their belief systems, Abraham ranks as the first monotheist who rejected the pagan divinities and their idols and worshipped the true God who revealed himself to him. [Modern scholars have concluded that the book of Genesis is a historical novel written only after the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity, and that monotheism in fact began with Akhenaten, the heretical pharaoh of Egypt in the fourteenth century B.C. But completely eradicated in Egypt itself after his death, Akhenaten's innovations left no resonance except for their possible survival in the neighboring Israelite monarchy, which began its rule under Egyptian cultural hegemony.]

All the Abrahamic religions proscribe homosexual behavior, a taboo that derives from the Holiness Code of the book of Leviticus and the legend of Sodom as these were received in Palestinian and then Hellenistic Judaism between the fifth century B.C. and the first century, when the writings of such Jewish apologists as Philo Judaeus and Flavius Josephus show it in a fully developed form. Thus the negative attitude of all three faiths has a single Old Testament source; its reception in Christianity is secondary and in Islam tertiary, the Islamic tradition having mainly been shaped by Nestorian Christianity of the early seventh century. All three contrast in the most striking manner with the role that homosexual behavior and the art and literature inspired by homoerotic feeling played in Greco-Roman paganism—a legacy that the medieval and modern world has never been able fully to suppress or disavow, but which has driven scholars and translators to acts of censorship and artful silence when confronted with texts and artifacts bequeathed by the ancient civilizations.

The claim of homophobic propagandists that the prohibition of homosexuality is universal rests essentially upon its proscription in the Abrahamic religions, which have primarily condemned male homosexuality. Lesbianism is nowhere mentioned in the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the Koran. The passage in Romans 1:26 that has often been interpreted as referring to lesbian sexuality actually concerns another Old Testament myth, the sexual union of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" in Genesis 6:1–4. The association of Sodom's twin city of Gomorrah with lesbianism is an accretion of the later Middle Ages and confined to Latin Christianity.

As for the texts in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, modern critical scholarship has identified them as part of a legal novella from the Persian period, and the entire Mosaic Law as a document compiled by Ezra and the "men of the Great Assembly" in the years 458–444 B.C., hence long after the return of the exiles from the Babylonian Captivity. The account of the destruction of Sodom is a geographical legend inspired by the salinization and aridity of the shores of the Dead Sea, a result of the