



Queer Sexuality and Identity in the Qur'an and Hadith

by Mark Brustman

The Qur'an generally scorns "approaching males in lust", as well as the castration of males, as the sin of the people of Lot (Qur'an 7:81, 26:165-166, 27:55, 29:28-29).

7:81 "Indeed you approach males in lust in place of women..."

Arabic: **إِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّنْ دُونِ النِّسَاءِ**

26:165-166 "What! Do you approach the males of the worlds and forsake those whom your Lord has created for you for your mates?"

Arabic: **أَتَأْتُونَ الذُّكْرَانَ مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ | وَتَذَرُونَ مَا خَلَقَ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ**

27:55 "Will you indeed approach males in lust in place of women?"

Arabic: **أَإِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ شَهْوَةً مِّنْ دُونِ النِّسَاءِ**

29:28-29 "Most surely you are guilty of an indecency which none of the nations has ever done before you; What! do you come unto the males and cut the passageways [i.e. vas deferens and/or urethra] and commit evil in your clubs?"

Arabic: **إِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الْفَاحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُمْ بِهَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ | أَإِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ وَتَقْطَعُونَ السَّبِيلَ وَتَأْتُونَ فِي نَادِيكُمُ الْمُنْكَرَ**

But the Qur'an does not prohibit using, as passive sex partners, the ancient category of men who by nature lacked desire for women, since such men were not considered "male" as a result of their lack of arousal for women. This kind of man is often known as "gay" in modern times, but in the ancient world he was identified as an anatomically whole "natural eunuch."

Although the Qur'an never uses the word eunuch [حَصِي], the hadith and the books of the legal scholars do. Furthermore, the Qur'an recognizes that some men are "not possessors of the desire (or skill) that belongs to adult males" (24:31: **غَيْرِ أُولَى الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ**)

and so, as domestic servants, are allowed to see women naked. This is a reference to natural eunuchs, i.e. innately and exclusively gay (if not totally asexual) men.

A person had to be indifferent to women's bodies in order to assume the role as a servant in women's private space. In the following case from the hadith, a household servant who had been falsely assumed to be indifferent to women due to his being an "effeminate man"

[*mukhannath*] **مُخَنَّثٌ** was evicted by the Prophet because he unexpectedly exhibited a lascivious attitude toward women:

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 114:

What is forbidden concerning the entering upon the wife by those imitating women. (162) Umm Salama reported that the Prophet, peace be upon him, was at her house, and in the house there was an effeminate man [**مُخَنَّثٌ**], and the effeminate man said to the brother of Umm Salama, Abdullah bin Abi Umayya: "If God makes you all conquer Ta'if tomorrow, I will point out to you the daughter of Ghailan, for surely she has four when coming towards you and eight when she turns her back." Then the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "This one shall not call upon you (pl.)."

Muslim, Collection of Authentic Traditions, Book XXVI (Greetings), Chapter 12:

(5415) Umm Salama reported that she had an effeminate man [**مُخَنَّثٌ**] in her house. The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, was once at the house when he (the effeminate man) said to the brother of Umm Salama, 'Abdullah b. Abu Umayya: "If God makes you all conquer Ta'if tomorrow, I will point out to you the daughter of Ghailan, for surely she has four when coming towards you and eight when she turns her back." The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, heard this and he said: "These ones shall not call upon you."

(5416) 'A'isha reported that an effeminate man [**مُخَنَّثٌ**] used to call upon the wives of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and they considered him to be "not a possessor of the desire/skill" [فكانوا يعدونه من غير أولى الأرة]. The Prophet, peace be upon him, came by one day as he (the effeminate man) was sitting with some of his wives and he was describing a woman, saying: "When she comes towards you, she has four, and when she turns her back, she has eight." Then the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "I see this one knows these things! He shall not call upon you (pl.)." She ('A'isha) said then they began to observe veil from him.

Note that in 'A'isha's telling of the story, she states that the women allowed him into their private rooms because they assumed he lacked "the desire/skill". (I use the words desire and skill together because the Arabic word has both meanings and because this particular skill depends on desire.) 'A'isha actually quotes the Qur'anic verse about men who are "not possessors of the desire/skill that belongs to males," demonstrating that his presence in the women's space would have been proper according to the Qur'an if only he had in fact lacked "the desire/skill." However, the statement of the effeminate man about the daughter of Ghailan, whatever it meant, indicated to Muhammad that he possessed the desire/skill that characterized adult males and that he had an appreciation of women as sexual objects. This disqualified him as an intimate domestic servant according to the Qur'an as well as the standards of the day. In a system that depended on household servants to be heterosexually indifferent, the main risk was that this indifference could be faked. In other words, an ordinary male could pretend to be an exclusive homosexual in order to gain free access to the private space of women.

There are other ahadith against cross-dressers in which the Prophet specifically curses "males" who imitate women and women who imitate males, and in which the consequence of their malfeasance is that he "evicts them from the houses." The specific reference to "males" who do this (as opposed to non-male eunuchs, for example) is made very explicit:

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXXII (Dress), Chapter 61:

(773) The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, cursed female-impersonators [m.pl.] who are males, and male-impersonators [f.pl.] who are women.

Arabic: لَعَنَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ الْمُتَشَبِّهِينَ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ بِالنِّسَاءِ
وَالْمُتَشَبِّهَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ بِالرِّجَالِ

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXXII (Dress), Chapter 62:

(774) The Prophet, peace be upon him, cursed the effeminate men [m.pl.] who are males, and the male-pretenders [f.pl.] who are women, and he said: Evict them from your houses, and the Prophet, peace be upon him, evicted such-and-such [m.sg.] and 'Umar evicted such-and-such [f.sg.].

Arabic: لَعَنَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ الْمُخَنَّثِينَ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ وَالْمُتَرَجِّلاتِ مِنَ
النِّسَاءِ وَقَالَ: أَخْرِجُوهُمْ مِنْ بُيُوتِكُمْ، قَالَ: فَأَخْرَجَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فُلَانًا،
وَأَخْرَجَ عُمَرُ فُلَانَةً

The words "males" and "women" are obviously emphatic here because the grammar does not really require them to be used, unless it be for emphasis or clarification. Masculine gender is already provided grammatically by the endings on the words "impersonators" and "effeminates," and feminine gender is already provided in the words "impersonators" and "male-pretenders." Given the emphasis, the curse is specifically directed only at "males" and "women," and does not cover non-males who might be female-impersonators (or non-women who might be male-impersonators, if indeed there was a recognition of "non-women"). It's okay to be a drag queen as long as you are not a straight man posing to gain access to unsuspecting women, or to the wives of unsuspecting husbands.

The Qur'an recognizes that there are some people who are "non-procreative" [عَقِيم], thus neither male nor female:

42:49 "To Allah belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. It creates what It wills. It prepares for whom It wills females, and It prepares for whom It wills males. 50 Or It marries together the males and the females, and It makes those whom It wills to be non-procreative. Indeed It is the Knowing, the Powerful."

Arabic: اللَّهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ يَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ إِنَاثًا وَيَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ الذُّكُورَ | أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَاثًا وَيَجْعَلُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيمٌ

These last two verses (42:49 and 50) are usually interpreted differently in English translations to say that God bestows daughters or sons on whom It wills and gives some people both sons and daughters. But there are problems with this interpretation, one of which being that the word for causing to marry or pairing up [زَوَّجَ] is used in the second verse. When families have boys and girls, the boys and girls do not usually arrive in pairs! The second problem is that, in Qur'anic verses mentioning males and females together, the males are usually mentioned first, and the females second (e.g., 3:195, 4:12, 4:124, 6:143-144, 16:97, 40:40, 42:50, 49:13, 53:21, 53:45, 75:39, 92:3). This is the only verse in the

Qur'an, as far as I know, in which the female is mentioned before the male. If these two verses were talking about sons and daughters, we would expect sons to be mentioned before daughters.

In this case, the "males first" principle would indicate that the lines are referring to females and males not as offspring, but as counterparts, i.e. objects of desire, for "whom(ever) God wills." The female objects of desire are mentioned first because they are most typically objects of desire for males. Hence, even this verse is referring to males first, as the most typical "whom(ever)" for whom God prepares females. Yet the use of the word "whom(ever)" leaves it open for females to be objects of desires for other females as well, when God wills, and for males to be love objects for females and other passive non-males. I believe this verse is very neatly and concisely describing the varieties of sexual orientation and gender, which Allah, the All-Knowing and All-Powerful, creates as Allah wishes.

The non-procreative can include abstinent women as well as men, and in fact "the abstinent ones among women, who do not hope for marriage" [وَالْفَوَاعِدُ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ الَّتِي لَا يَرْجُونَ] وَنِكَاحاً], are permitted to "put off their cover" in Sura 24:60.

Another intriguing example of a gender variant woman is Jesus's mother Mary. According to ancient notions about procreation, males were the only ones capable of producing seed. It would be impossible for a woman to give birth to a child, let alone a boy, without receiving seed from a male. In Christianity, this problem is solved by making God the male father of Jesus. According to the Qur'an, however, God does not procreate. This means that the seed that became Jesus came from within Mary. If Mary carried viable seed originating from within her, then by ancient definitions, she was a male, despite appearances to the contrary. So the Qur'an says that, when Mary was born, her mother declared that she was a female baby, but God knew better:

(Qur'an 3:36) Lord, surely, I have brought it forth a female - and Allah knew best what she brought forth - and the male is not like the female...

Arabic: رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنْثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَيْسَ الذَّكَرُ كَالْأُنْثَىٰ

There are other traditions about the gender variance of Mary. I have argued elsewhere that Mary's virginity is not merely the innocent state of a girl who has not yet known a man, but a more permanent rejection of sex with men, like that of the Vestal virgins in Rome. In Isaiah 7:14, it is predicted that a virgin will conceive bear a son, but the word for virgin used there is not the generic *bethulah* (בתולה) used throughout the Hebrew scripture for girls who have not yet had sex. Instead, the word *almah* (עלמה) is used, a very rare word in the scriptures, which is the female counterpart to *elem* (עלם), meaning boy. In the other verses in which it is used, it is compatible with a meaning of tomboy or rebuffer of men (cf. Proverbs 30:18-19, in which an *almah* appears to be impermeable to men).

Homosexual activity by straight men

Homosexual activity by homosexuals (eunuchs) is not spoken of in the Qur'an, which mentions only the unjust homosexual rape perpetrated by straight men against other straight men. Besides the Lut story, sexual exploitation of straight males is also alluded to in the assurance that the prophet Joseph's slaveholders "abstained from him" (12:20: وَكَانُوا فِيهِ مِنَ الزَّاهِدِينَ).

But the Qur'an and hadith also have traces of the permitted homosexual desires of straight men. There is even a hadith in Bukhari, admittedly giving not the Prophet's opinion but that of Abu Jafar, according to which a pedophile is prohibited from marrying the mother of his boy-beloved if there is penetration:

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 25:

As for whom(ever) plays with a boy: if he inserted it into him, then he shall not marry his mother

Arabic: **فَيَمَنْ يَلْعَبُ بِالصَّبِيِّ: إِنْ أَدْخَلَهُ فِيهِ فَلَا يَتَزَوَّجَنَّ أُمَّهُ**

(This rule is accompanied in the same chapter by prohibitions against a man marrying both a mother and her daughter.) Apparently according to this hadith, even sexual penetration of a boy is not considered sodomy, because if it was, surely the sodomite would have more worries than whether he could marry the boy's mother! Like whether he preferred to die by fire, stoning, or falling from a high tower! These are some of the punishments mentioned in the hadith for "doing as the people of Lut did." [A reader wrote in to say that this hadith would not necessarily imply that penetration of boys was not sodomy, but could be a recognition of the fact that not all crimes will be discovered and punished and that one who does penetrate a boy, even if he is not punished for sodomy for whatever reason, should at least know in his own conscience that the mother of his boyfriend is off limits. In any case, one possible inference from this hadith is still very interesting: namely, that if a man plays with a boy without penetration, then marrying the mother is still a possibility!!]

The distinction between pederasty (sex with boys) and sodomy (penetration of "males") was commonly, albeit not universally maintained throughout the ancient world, and indeed survived throughout most of the history of Islam until at least the nineteenth century (in spite of the futile objections of some medieval scholars). Apparently, boy-love was considered okay by many people because, like "natural eunuchs," adolescent boys were also thought to lack the "desire/skill that belongs to adult males" (sexual potency with women, or at any rate fertility). The Qur'an itself gives support to pederasts in its glimpses of paradise:

52:24 And they shall have boys [غِلْمَانٌ] who will walk around among them, as if they were hidden pearls.

56:22-23 And dark-eyed ones [حُورٌ عَيْنٌ], the like of hidden pearls

76:19 And boys never altering in age [وِلْدَانٌ مُتَخَلِّدُونَ] will circulate among them, when you see them you will count them as scattered pearls.

2:25 And they shall have immaculate partners [أَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ] in [the gardens] ...

4:57 And they shall have immaculate partners [أَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ] in them ...

One of the great male Sufi contemporaries of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya provided a divine justification for a pederastic relationship, which was repeated without a hint of disapproval in a 10th century book about great Sufi women:

One day Rabi'a saw Rabah [al-Qaysi] kissing a young boy [وهو يقبل صبيا صغيرا]. 'Do you love him?' she asked. 'Yes,' he said. To which she replied, 'I did not imagine that there was room in your heart to love anything other than God, the Glorious and Mighty!' Rabah was overcome at this and fainted. When he awoke, he said, 'On the contrary, this is a mercy that God Most High has put into the hearts of his slaves.'

(Quoted from as-Sulami, *Early Sufi Women* = ذكر النسوة المتعبدات الصوفيات, translated by Rkia E. Cornell, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999, pp. 78-79.)

Sexual use of eunuchs

Besides boys, straight Muslim men were occasionally interested in grown adults as well, provided they were not "male." There is a hadith in which the Prophet's companions asked whether they were allowed to use men (presumably prisoners of war) as eunuchs to fulfill their sexual urges, since they were far from their wives.

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 6:

(9) Narrated ibn Mas'ud: We used to fight alongside the Prophet, peace be upon him. There were no women with us, so we said: "O Messenger of God, may we not treat some as eunuchs [ألا نستخصي]?" He forbade us to do so.

The version in Bukhari, Book LXII Ch. 8:13a says that rather than let the companions "treat [some] as eunuchs" while stuck out on military campaign, the Prophet allowed them to have sex with a sexually experienced, unmarried woman who would take a cloak as compensation [رَخَّصَ لَنَا أَنْ نَنْكِحَ الْمَرَأَةَ بِالثَّوْبِ], and he recited to them from the Qur'an (5:87): "O ye who believe! Make not unlawful the good things which Allah has made lawful for you, but commit no transgression." This mention of a cloak as compensation is a reference to a story that is told with more details in Sahih Muslim, Book of Nikah, Hadith 13, 22 and 23. The permission to have sex with a woman for an agreed price reflects the ancient view that a man could not commit adultery by having sex with an unmarried, sexually experienced woman, but only by having sex with a married woman or a marriageable daughter.

Clearly, when the companions came to the Prophet asking if they could designate eunuchs, it was because they were seeking a way to find lawful sexual release, and they saw eunuchs as such a way. The fact that Muhammad forbade the companions from treating captive men as eunuchs, or making them into eunuchs, is not the point here. Of course, using a straight male as a eunuch was wrong -- that was essentially the sin of the people of Lut. But what about using a natural eunuch (i.e. one who permanently lacks arousal with women) as a eunuch? Given that ibn Mas'ud made reference to the use of eunuchs for sexual gratification, and given that the Prophet understood what he meant, that indicates that the use of eunuchs for sexual gratification was known in Arabic society, and was considered a use that was appropriate to eunuchs. Since eunuchs were not considered male, there was no prohibition against it, not even in the Qur'an.

Eunuchs were still sex objects for straight men in the Mamluk dynasty, according to David Ayalon in *Eunuchs, Caliphs, and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem, 1999). They not only served to prevent older Mamluks from having sexual access to younger trainees:

The eunuchs seem to have served as a shield against homosexual lust in yet another way. They themselves formed the target of that lust, thus diverting it from the youngsters. They are described as being womanly and docile in bed at night and manly and warlike by day in a campaign and in similar circumstances (*hum nisaa' li-mutma'inn muqeem wa rijaal in kaanat al-asfaar; li-annahum bil-nahaar fawaaris wa bil-layl 'araa'is*). [Arabic transcribed by Ayalon on page 34, from Abu Mansur al-Tha'alibi, Al-Lataa'if wal-Zaraa'if, Cairo 1324/1906-7, p. 79, lines 1-7; and the same quote from Tha'alibi in his Tamtheel wal-Muhaadara, Cairo 1381/1961, p. 224.]

A eunuch Companion?

As for the issue of whether Muhammad himself expressly acknowledged that some people by nature are incapable of heterosexuality, thus being natural eunuchs, consider the following ahadith.

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 2:

The Statement of the Prophet, peace be upon him: "Whoever is able to perform coitus should get married, for it helps him lower his gaze and use his private parts in the best way." And should he get married who does not have a desire for conjugal intercourse?

(3) Narrated 'Alqama: [...] I heard [Abdullah] saying [to Uthman]: [...] The Prophet, peace be upon him, once said to us: "O young men! Whoever among you is able to perform coitus, he should get married, and whoever is not able, should abstain, because it will unnerve him."

The Arabic of the last sentence is: **يَا مَعْشَرَ الشَّبَابِ مَنْ اسْتَطَاعَ مِنْكُمُ الْبَاءَةَ فَلْيَتَزَوَّجْ، وَمَنْ لَمْ يَسْتَطِعْ فَعَلَيْهِ بِالصَّوْمِ، فَإِنَّهُ لَهُ وَجَاءٌ**

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 3:

Whoever is not able to perform coitus should abstain.

(4) Narrated Abdullah: We were with the Prophet, peace be upon him, as young men and we did not feel any passion. And the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said to us: "O young men! Whoever among you is able to perform coitus, he should get married, and whoever is not able, should abstain, because it will unnerve him."

In the next case, a specific man, Uthman bin Madh'un, comes to ask if he can be permitted to live a life of asceticism, and he is not allowed to:

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 8:

What is disliked about asceticism and eunuchism.

(11) Narrated Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas: The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, forbade Uthman bin Madh'un to be an ascetic, and if he had allowed him, we would have lived as eunuchs.

(12) Narrated Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas: He forbade this, that is to say, the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, forbade 'Uthman bin Madh'un, and if he had allowed him to be an ascetic, we would have lived as eunuchs.

The Arabic of the last sentence is: **وَلَوْ أَجَازَ لَهُ التَّبَهُلُ لِإِخْتِصَانِنَا**

But notice the different outcome in the following case:

Bukhari, Authentic Traditions, Book LXII (Marriage), Chapter 8:

(13b) Narrated Abu Huraira: I said, "O Messenger of God, I am a young male, and I fear torment for myself, but I do not feel that with which to marry women" **[إِنِّي رَجُلٌ]**

إِشَابٌ وَأَنَا أَخَافُ عَلَى نَفْسِي الْعَنْتَ وَلَا أَجِدُ مَا أَتَزَوَّجُ بِهِ النِّسَاءَ. He remained silent. Then I said something similar to that, and he remained silent. Then I said something similar to that, and he remained silent. Then I said something similar to that. Then the Prophet of God, peace be upon him, said: "O Abu Huraira, the pen is dried as to what you are experiencing. So be a eunuch for that reason or leave it alone." [يَا أَبَا هُرَيْرَةَ، جَفَّ الْقَلَمُ بِمَا أَنْتَ لَاقٍ فَاخْتَصِ عَلَى ذَلِكَ أَوْ ذَرِّ].

This hadith is packed with information that raises a load of questions: What does he mean by his being a "young male"? What is the torment that he fears for himself? What does he not have that he would need in order to pair up with women? And why does he use the plural "marry women" and not say "marry a woman" as one might well expect? Why does the Prophet (sas) stay silent, and wait for him to repeat the statement, and why does he answer on exactly the fourth time? Finally, what does the Prophet's command mean: "So be a eunuch for that reason or leave it alone"? Leave what alone? Stop doing what?

Since Abu Huraira calls himself a young male or male youth, we have to assume he is on the verge of adulthood or has just crossed over into adulthood when he makes his statement. He is at the point when his maleness will really have to show itself -- if not, he will find himself in the eunuch category. The test of manhood is precisely sexual potency with women, which in a fully grown adult signifies fertility. Whoever did not develop that skill, would be a eunuch by default.

Abu Huraira is at a critical time of life when everything changes for a male. In ancient times throughout the Mediterranean world, beardless adolescent boys were often objects of adoration and courtship for other older men, and there is some evidence that this situation was also known among the Arabs, as indicated above. But when a boy crossed over into manhood, he was no longer a fit object for this kind of attention. What made him no longer fit was his newly acquired status as a full-grown male, which implied that he was now fertile for procreation with women as evidenced by, among other things, his getting erections around women.

Abu Huraira is just crossing this threshold, but he has a couple of problems. First, he says, he fears torment for himself, that is, for his nafs. The word for torment here is 'anat, which is used in the Qur'an in a context (surat Nisa', 4:25) that suggests it is the torment of sexual abstinence. Some interpreters view it as the torment of having committed sins. For them, the torment must be the remorse that comes after the inevitable failure to be abstinent. They do not like to think of Allah (swt) describing sexual abstinence as a torment that requires a remedy. But it is much simpler and more true to human nature to assume that the torment is that of living under the influence of youthful sexual hormones with no appropriate way of working them out. In sura 4:25, the ones feeling torment are men who lack the power or status to marry (or have sex with) free believing women, and the remedy for their torment is to allow them to marry (or have sex with) slave girls with the permission of their families, as long as they pay them their due compensation and as long as the slave girls are not seeing other men.

But Abu Huraira has come with a different problem than the men referred to in the Qur'an. He does not find in himself what it takes to marry "women" at all. He is not talking about their social status, but their gender. Now, if he had meant to say that he was so poor that he could not afford even a slave girl, he would have said that he did not have what he needed "to marry a woman." After all, before he starts complaining that he can't afford a bunch of wives, he would probably first say whether he could afford one. But he doesn't talk about one woman, he starts right in by saying that what he lacks is the ability to marry "women." Because he uses the plural, the statement becomes an enunciation of his inability to be with

women in general. Abu Huraira is expressing that he is impotent with women.

So if Abu Huraira is impotent with women, what is the nature of the torment that he fears? The word 'anat still suggests the torment of sexual abstinence. It is still the question of how to exercise his hormonally dictated sexual needs. Of course, if he is not aroused by women, having to abstain from sex with them would not even be a problem, let alone a torment. But what about having sex with men?

By calling himself a male, he is cutting himself out of the pool of potential passive partners for other men. But by admitting his impotence with women, he is excluding himself from the male category. The statement is confusing, and perhaps necessarily so, since Abu Huraira is still a young man, and who knows, perhaps he might still develop sexual feelings for women.

And so it is natural that the Prophet would not rush to answer, but rather remain silent. He cannot settle Abu Huraira's dilemma, because he does not have enough information to be sure of the correct answer.

Why does he wait for him to ask four times? Four times is for the four seasons. In Hanafi law on impotence as grounds for divorce, the wife has to give the husband a whole year to consummate the marriage before she can choose to divorce him, because a man is not at his best at every time of year, and he may have to wait for the season that most agrees with him before he is able to perform, which may be summer, fall, winter or spring. Even if the husband is a eunuch, she still has to wait a year to see if he can consummate, but if he is castrated, she can get a divorce right away (see Al-Marghinani, Hidayah, Book on Divorce, Chapter on Impotence).

Abu Huraira comes to the Prophet saying the same thing four times, meaning that he is in the same condition no matter what time of year it is. And so, the Prophet tells him his condition is permanent, using a metaphor for a sealed destiny: "The pen is dried as to what you are experiencing." Here you have a statement from the Prophet affirming that a eunuch, or in modern terms a gay man, cannot change his sexual orientation.

Finally, what does the answer mean: "So be a eunuch for that reason or let it be"? The alternatives he gives are stark: (a) be a eunuch or (b) let it be. What is it that the young man on the brink of adulthood would have to stop doing, unless he were a eunuch? What does a youth do before adulthood that males cannot do in adulthood but eunuchs can? One answer springs to mind: youths are love objects for men, particularly playing the passive role as the "beloved", until they reach manhood when the active-passive sexual relationship with the older male lover has to stop. That is one thing that he will have to cease doing if he is not a eunuch. But a eunuch never achieves manhood, so there is no reason why he would have to stop being passive with men. Notice that "being a eunuch" is the opposite alternative to "stopping" whatever you were doing; in other words, a eunuch does not have to stop.

So we have our answer.

To sum up, Abu Huraira, the "father of a kitten," has come to the Prophet as a very young man, on the brink of adulthood, and has admitted that he is currently impotent with women. The Prophet waits for a year before giving his opinion. But after a year has passed and Abu Huraira's statement has not changed, the Prophet tells him that what he is experiencing is not going to change, so Abu Huraira has to make a decision between two options. He can't go back and forth from one option to the other. He can be a eunuch and keep doing what he was doing before to meet his sexual needs -- which seems to be the anticipated choice. Or if being a eunuch is not the choice Abu Huraira wants to make, then he will have to stop doing whatever he was doing and conform to the rules for adult males. It appears Abu Huraira chose to live as a eunuch in keeping with his consistent year-long testimony, given that he

never married or had any children. That might go some way to explain his controversial reputation.

Prohibition of public displays

Finally, there is a pair of verses calling for punishment in cases of indecency (فَاجِشَةً) between people of any gender (4:15-16). These verses are often cited as a prohibition of homosexuality because one of the verses refers to indecency committed by women (with the implication that men were not involved). But in referring separately to an act committed by women, these verses are simply covering all the bases, so to speak. In order to address all cases, it is necessarily for grammatical reasons to deal separately with an offense by women only. As to what is meant by an indecency, the text does not specify. But in order for someone to be convicted of the offense, four eyewitnesses have to testify to it, which seems to indicate some sort of public act. Certainly the idea that, for the sake of decency, erotic behavior should be carried out in private goes back at least as far as Plato. In any case, by "indecency," these verses are not referring to homosexuality *per se*, since two people of opposite sex can also be covered by verse 4:16.

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