

William Loader\*

# Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in the Light of Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of its Time

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**Abstract:** In seeking common ground with his readers Paul uses same sex relations to depict human depravity. In doing so he uses many of the arguments familiar from ethical discourse in the Greco-Roman world of his time, but employs them within a Jewish frame of reference. Thus the perverted mind, attitudes and actions are produced by perverted responses to God. The shame of making males passive is ultimately the shame of contravening what God created them to be. Exceptionally he relates the unnatural not to denying procreation, but to denying the created order of (only) male and female and implies the Leviticus prohibitions apply to both. Strong passion is problematic when wrongly directed. Paul's argument is typically theological and psychological.

**Zusammenfassung:** Da er eine gemeinsame Basis mit seinen Lesern sucht, verwendet Paulus das Beispiel gleichgeschlechtlicher Beziehungen, um die menschliche Verdorbenheit darzustellen. Dabei benutzt er viele der Argumente, die vom ethischen Diskurs in der griechisch-römischen Welt seiner Zeit her vertraut sind, wendet diese aber innerhalb eines jüdischen Referenzrahmens an. So werden die pervertierten Gedanken, Einstellungen und Handlungen hervorgerufen durch pervertierte Reaktionen auf Gott. Die Schande, Männer den passiven Part einnehmen zu lassen, ist letzten Endes die Schande, dem zuwiderzuhandeln, was Gott sie zu sein geschaffen hat. Ungewöhnlicherweise bezieht er das "Unnatürliche" nicht darauf, sich der Fortpflanzung zu verweigern, sondern darauf, die geschaffene Ordnung von (ausschließlich) "männlich und weiblich" abzulehnen, und impliziert damit, dass die Verbote in Leviticus für beide Geschlechter gelten. Starke Leidenschaft ist dann problematisch, wenn sie in die falsche Richtung gelenkt wird. Paulus' Argumentation ist typisch theologisch *und* psychologisch.

**Keywords:** Homosexual; Passion; Perversion; Male; Female.

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\*Corresponding author: William Loader, Emeritus Professor, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia and Extraordinary Professor, North West-University, South Africa  
W.Loader@murdoch.edu.au

In relation to those few view verses in Romans 1 where Paul condemns homosexual relations (1,24–28) it is extraordinary that what for him in the first century and for the recipients of his letter in Rome was the least controversial of themes and indeed the reason why he uses it, has become in the 21st century one of the most controversial, especially for those whose understanding of scriptural authority entails believing that biblical writers were always correct in what they said and what they assumed. For those of us whose understanding of scriptural authority does not entail such belief we can only stand and wonder at the extraordinary manoeuvres which have been undertaken to re-read Paul as not condemning homosexual relations at all.

## 1 Paul not Serious?

Perhaps the most extraordinary attempt to detoxify Paul's comments is that of William Countryman, who mounts the argument that Paul cites the condemnation as a ploy, only to abandon it at the point when he turns on his hearers in 2,1 and charges them with hypocrisy because they themselves have sinned. Accordingly, for Paul, he argues, condemning same sex relations, a standard marker between Jews and non Jews, is now like circumcision and food laws to be abandoned.<sup>1</sup> Paul concedes that same-sex acts are seen by Jews as dirty practices,<sup>2</sup> reflected in his use of the word, ἀκαθαρσία in 1,24, but does not condemn them morally. "While Paul wrote of same-gender sexual acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and 'over against nature,' he did not apply his extensive vocabulary for sin to them [...] It was not in itself sinful, but had been visited upon Gentile culture".<sup>3</sup> He concedes that Paul "is no doubt looking askance at it here",<sup>4</sup> but the target of his condemnation is not same sex relations but idolatry and the sins listed in 1,29–31. It is because of these that God handed people over to engage in same sex relations. Thus he reads πεπληρωμένους (1,29) as "having been filled",<sup>5</sup> indicating that Paul refers to people's sins only in response to which God let people be

1 L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, Minneapolis 2007, 109.122; similarly Daniel Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, New Mexico 2000, 77–83; Thomas Hanks, *Romans*, in: Deryn Guest et al. (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, London 2006, 582–605, here 586.

2 Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 110–111.116.

3 Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 116.

4 Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 111.

5 Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 115; Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 588–589.

dirtied by unclean actions. Engaging in same sex relations is “unnatural” in the sense that it is in “notable discontinuity from what would previously have been expected”, but is not itself sin.<sup>6</sup> Paul’s aim is rather to refocus attention to those who are doing the condemning and expose them in 2,1 as hypocritical.<sup>7</sup> Similar Hanks writes that “Paul’s laying of his rhetorical trap in 1.18–32 leads readers to assume he is simply echoing Leviticus, while the springing of the trap (2.1–16) and declaring all things clean (14.14, 21) make clear his conclusion that Jewish purity legislation was not literally binding on the Roman churches”.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly Countryman argues: “The real question is why modern readers have so easily assumed that he would be willing to seek accommodation on circumcision, food purity, and Sabbath observance, but not on the matter of same-gender sexual relationships”.<sup>9</sup> “Surprising as it may seem, then, the text (Rom. 1,18–32) that currently seems to figure most prominently in Christian debates about same-gender sexual relationships probably bears witness to a situation exactly opposite that envisioned by the modern religious right”.<sup>10</sup>

Such an interpretation stands in tension with what appears to be purpose of Paul’s argument between 1,16–17 and 3,21–28, which is to show that all have sinned and need the good news of the gospel, Jew and Greek, summarised in these key texts. All, “both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin” (3,9). Paul is mounting a case for the legitimacy of his gospel which calls all to faith in Jesus Christ apart from the Law. He must defend his gospel then against charges that he propounds something lawless or implies the Law is not good, or that promises to Israel do not count, and that will busy him in the rest of his letter. Here in Romans 1, as already in the use of christological tradition in 1,3–5, Paul seeks common ground. That common ground lies in the condemnation of same sex relations which he knows the hearers of his letter will similarly condemn.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 114.

<sup>7</sup> Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 122.

<sup>8</sup> Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 590, who claims that Paul was a repressed homosexual (585), mistakenly citing Gerd Theißen, *Psychologische Aspekte paulinischer Theologie* (FRLANT 131), Göttingen 1983, in support (598) and overlooking that Theißen is expressing not his own view but that of others (238).

<sup>9</sup> Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Countryman, *Dirt* (see n. 1), 122.

<sup>11</sup> See the critical assessments in Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Nashville 2001, 273–277; and Dan O. Via, *The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality, and Response to Robert A. J. Gagnon*, in: Dan O. Via/Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, Minneapolis 2003, 1–39. 93–98, who concludes: “Paul reinterprets homosexuality as sin rather than as uncleanness” (10).

It is thus most unlikely that Paul's use of the word ἀκαθαρσία in 1,24 is designed to avoid a moral tone. The same word is clearly used of sexual sin in 1Thess 4,7, alongside ἐπιθυμία and πόθη (1Thess 4,5) as here and also in Wis 2,16.<sup>12</sup> This makes it most unlikely that Paul means only ritual uncleanness here. Countryman presses the potential past sense of the perfect πεπληρωμένους in 1,29, but it can equally and more likely refer as often with perfect passive participles to a present state of being. The references to God's giving people up to "desires" (1,24), or "passions" (1,26), and to do τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα (lit. "what is unseemly") (1,28), negative Stoic terminology and connected with the list of sins of 1,29–31, cannot be explained away as referring to a morally neutral outcome or mere ritual defilement. The allusion to the death penalty which follows the list may well allude to the death penalty for same sex acts in Lev 20,13. In 2,1 Paul is not condemning hypocrites for condemning what should not be condemned, but for not seeing that they too are sinners. That is the rhetorical trap, for he catches them in their own self-righteousness.

## 2 Approach

In what follows I shall focus on what Paul actually says in 1,18–32, and in particular on 1,24–28 and do so not only in the light of the rhetorical and existential context but also, in accordance with what must belong in any listening across cultures and across time, namely reading these texts in their Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. In doing so I shall avoid the danger of mono-derivative readings which suggest only one context plays a role and instead consider the likelihood that a range of possible influences and echoes may be present in the text. Unless there are serious grounds for doing so – and in this case there are not – it makes little sense to impose false alternatives on our readings as though Paul operated from either a Jewish background or a wider Hellenistic background.

The issues comes up already when we consider the observations of Swancutt that Paul may have had in mind hypocrisy among some Roman Stoics who promulgated self-discipline and restraint of passions, condemning same sex relations, while at the same time engaging in them with their students.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly in 2,1

<sup>12</sup> So James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (WBC 38AB), Nashville 1988, 62. See also Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK), Göttingen 2003, 89–90; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 233; Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia), Minneapolis 2007, 168.

<sup>13</sup> So Diana M. Swancutt, "The Disease of Effemination": The Charge of Effeminity and the Verdict of God (Romans 1:18–2:16), in: Stephen D. Moore (ed.), *New Testament Masculinities* (Se-

Paul would be confronting such Stoic hypocrisy.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that Paul employs language and concepts in the passage which have Stoic associations,<sup>15</sup> but it is clear that the focus of Paul's argument between 1,16–17 and 3,21–28 is not Stoic philosophers but Jews and Gentiles, as 2,9–10 shows, and demonstrating that all are bound by sin (3,9.23). Similarly the motif of idolatry does not sit well with this theory. On the other hand, a secondary allusion to Stoic misdemeanours is not impossible.

There could also be secondary allusions to same-sex acts in the imperial household, whether Nero's, as Jewett suggests,<sup>16</sup> or Caligula's, who was stabbed through his genitals, to which Elliott alludes as a possible background for 1,27.<sup>17</sup> These are possible, even though in the case of the latter Paul refers not to an individual but in the plural to people experiencing in their bodies the backlash of such behaviour. Paul's argument, however, is not primarily to target distinctive groups in Rome, but the Gentile world in general and so uses what was, as Countryman rightly noted, a common marker to differentiate Jewish from Gentile culture, but one which he sustains.

The primary starting point must be the text itself and its context. After stating his gospel in 1,16–17 of which he in no way relents, is not ashamed, and will defend, Paul begins by speaking of God's wrath. It is directed against those who pervert the truth that they know and instead worship gods modelled on human beings and animals. They are without excuse. One finds a similar logic in 1Thess 4,3–8 where Paul links sexual wrongdoing with people not knowing God: *μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν θεόν* (4,5),<sup>18</sup> and also in 1Cor 10,7–8 where he links Israel's idolatry and sexual sin at Sinai.<sup>19</sup>

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meiaSt 45), Atlanta 2003, 193–234; Diana M. Swancutt, *Sexy Stoics and the Rereading of Romans 1.18–2.16*, in: Amy-Jill Levine/Marianne Blickenstaff (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, London 2004, 42–73.

**14** So Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 205–206; Swancutt, *Stoics* (see n. 13), 59.

**15** Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 224; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33), New York 1993, 275; Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, Minneapolis 1998, 104; Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 175.

**16** Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 171.

**17** Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*, Minneapolis 2008, 79–82; see also James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*, Grand Rapids 2013, 157.

**18** Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles*, New Haven et al. 1994, 97.

**19** Rom 1,23 lists creatures typical of Egyptian idolatry and its language perhaps alludes to Ps 106,20 (105,20 LXX) which speaks of Israel at Sinai exchanging God's glory (*καὶ ἠλλάξαντο τὴν δόξαν*) for the likeness of an ox that eats grass (cf. also Deut 4,6–18). So Bernadette J. Brooten,

### 3 Jewish and Christian Tradition

ואת־זכר לא תשכב משכבי אשה תועבה הוא

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Lev 18,22)

ואיש אשר ישכב את־זכר משכבי אשה תועבה עשו שניהם מות יומתו דמיהם בם

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Lev 20,13)<sup>20</sup>

Paul is standing in a long tradition which associates sexual immorality and idolatry.<sup>21</sup> We see this already in the way these Leviticus prohibitions are framed with reference to the idolatrous ways of the Canaanites and Egyptians (18,1–5.24–30). The Wisdom of Solomon similarly cites idolatry as the basis for sexual immorality (13,1 – 14,31), like Paul appealing to God’s self-revelation in creation which left people without excuse.<sup>22</sup> The tradition preserved in TestNaf 3,1 – 4,1 links the judgement from heaven against the Watchers and the people of Sodom on the grounds of perverted behaviour contrary to nature on the basis of a perverted understanding of God in nature and its divine law.<sup>23</sup>

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Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism, Chicago 1998, 231–232; John Nolland, Romans 1:26–27 and the Homosexuality Debate, HBT 22 (2000) 32–57, here 40.42; Angelika Winterer, Verkehrte Sexualität – ein umstrittenes Pauluswort: Eine exegetische Studie zu Röm. 1,26 f. in der Argumentationsstruktur des Römerbriefes und im kulturhistorisch-sozialgeschichtlichen Kontext (Europäische Hochschulschriften Reihe XXIII: 810), Frankfurt 2005, 282; James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, Grand Rapids 1998, 119; Michael Wolter, Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1–8 (EKK VI/1), Neukirchen/Ostfildern 2014, 144–145. Israel was also capable of idolatry.

**20** For discussion of the origin and import of these statements in their context see William Loader, The New Testament on Sexuality, Grand Rapids 2012, 22–27, and on other OT texts including the Genesis creation stories, Sodom and Gomorrah and alleged homoerotics in the relationship of David and Jonathan see pp. 27–31.

**21** Fitzmyer, Romans (see n. 15), 272; Brendan J. Byrne, Romans (SP 6), Collegeville 1996, 69; Dale B. Martin, Heterosexism and its Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32, in: *idem*, Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation, Louisville 2006, 51–64, here 53.

**22** See William Loader, The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, Legends, Wisdom, and Related Literature, Grand Rapids 2011, 419–422; Jewett, Romans (see n. 12), 174; Nissinen, Homoeroticism (see n. 15), 104; Brooten, Love (see n. 19), 294–298; Raymond Collins, Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief, New York 2000, 140–141; Gagnon, Practice (see n. 11), 247–249; Michael Brinkschröder, Sodom als Symptom: Gleichgeschlechtliche Sexualität im christlichen Imaginären – eine religionsgeschichtliche Anamnese (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 55), Berlin 2006, 517–518. On the subtle distinction between the two passages, one (Paul) assuming knowledge of God, the other assuming ignorance, see Wolter, Römer (see n. 19), 141.

**23** William Loader, Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexual-

Same sex relations commonly feature in condemnation of pagan cultures, especially in writings composed in the diaspora,<sup>24</sup> such as in the *Sibylline Oracles*, *Pseudo-Aristeas* and *Pseudo-Phocylides*, mostly as pederasty (Sib 3,596–599.764; 4,33–34), and also in the context of male prostitution (Sib 3,185–187). Sib 5,166–168 condemns Rome as an “effeminate and unjust, evil city” and “unclean” for its “adulteries and illicit intercourse with boys” (similarly 5,387 in association with incest, prostitution of its virgins, probably *fellatio*, and bestiality; cf. also 5,430).<sup>25</sup> 2 *Enoch* condemns “sin which is against nature, which is child corruption in the anus in the manner of Sodom” (10,2), but also consenting adults: “friend with friend in the anus” (34,1–2 MS P).<sup>26</sup> ApocAbr 24,8 speaks of naked men standing forehead to forehead.<sup>27</sup> *Pseudo-Aristeas* condemns cities for their fostering male prostitution (152; cf. also 108; 130).<sup>28</sup> *Pseudo-Phocylides* lists together arousing homosexual passion with the prohibition of adultery in the decalogue (3) and applies the Leviticus prohibitions by extension to female same-sex relations (190–192). Using Plato’s argument that not even animals do such things (191, cf. Plato, Leg 836C), the author declares it unnatural, and also warns parents not to braid their boys’ hair lest they be targeted by predators (210–214).<sup>29</sup>

Philo has extensive references to what he sees as the depravity of his world, much of it focused on pederasty (SpecLeg III 37; QuaestGen IV 37.39; VitCont 50–52.59; Hypoth VII 1), and sexual exploitation of minors (predominantly slaves) (Prob 124), but extended also to consenting adults (Abr 135–136), not only male but also female (QuaestGen II 49; Virt 20–21; Her 274), and informed by

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ity in the Writings of Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Grand Rapids 2011, 416–417; Brinkschröder, Sodom (see n. 22), 511.519–522.

**24** By contrast we find nothing in the Enoch literature gathered in 1 Enoch, nor in Jubilees, though its reference to Gomorrah may assume it (16,5–6; 20,5–6). At Qumran beside references to the Leviticus prohibitions (4QD<sup>a</sup>/4Q270 2 ii.16–18/6QD/6Q15 5 3–4), including prohibition of cross-dressing (4QD<sup>f</sup>/4Q271 3 3–4; 4QOr<sup>a</sup>/4Q159), there may possibly be a reference 4QCate<sup>a</sup>/4Q177 iv.10, which refers to disgusting acts and people wallowing together in sin in Sodom and Gomorrah. On this see William Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran*, Grand Rapids 2009, 270–272.361–362.

**25** Loader, *Pseudepigrapha* (see n. 22), 56–63.65–68. Michael Brinkschröder, *Die Karriere des Homosexualitätsverbots im Diasporajudentum: Ehebruch und Päderastie zwischen Heiligkeitsgesetz und Dekalog*, in: Bernhard Heininger (ed.), *Geschlechterdifferenz in religiösen Symbolsystemen*, Münster 2003, 158–169 notes the frequent linking of adultery and pederasty in Jewish literature.

**26** On this see Loader, *Pseudepigrapha* (see n. 22), 39.46.

**27** Loader, *Pseudepigrapha* (see n. 22), 110.

**28** Loader, *Pseudepigrapha* (see n. 22), 426–433.

**29** Loader, *Pseudepigrapha* (see n. 22), 457–476.



the Leviticus prohibitions which he exegetes directly (SpecLeg III 37–42).<sup>30</sup> But, like Paul, he also employs arguments drawn from his wider Hellenistic context. These include that it is shameful for a man to be penetrated and thus succumb to what he calls the female disease (Abr 136; VitCont 60; SpecLeg I 325; II 50; III 37), that resultant alleged impotence (Abr 135) and waste of semen threatens survival of the species (SpecLeg III 37.39) and the depopulation of cities (SpecLeg III 32–33.39; Abr 135–36; VitCont 62), and so is contrary to nature as God created it to be (linking nature arguments with Genesis), namely to bear fruit (Gen 1,28).

He is aware of claims that some are naturally homosexual, in particular as articulated by the figure Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, who traces same gender attraction to a myth of Zeus' anger at human insolence and cutting males, females and androgynous humans in half, who thus have ever since sought their other half (VitCont 50–63; cf. Plato, *Symp* 189–193). But he emphatically rejects such claims and does so on the basis of Gen 1,27, that God created human beings male and female and by implication only male and female. Philo refers to eunuchs, including those who are eunuchs from birth (Jos 58; Somn II 184; Ebr 211), but he assumes them to be male, impotent males who might in other ways still be sexually active. Their being eunuchs had, therefore, nothing to do with their sexual orientation, though he criticises some among them severely for becoming obsessed with seeking sexual fulfilment and serving such needs for others (Imm 111; Mut 173), including other males.

Philo is also indebted to philosophical discussions of the danger of excessive passion, often depicting same sex intercourse as the outcome of excessive alcohol, leading to excessive and uncontrolled passion, which expressed itself in sexual promiscuity with both women and men (Abr 135; VitCont 53–56).<sup>31</sup> The men of Sodom are typical of such excess where men indiscriminately engage in sexual liaisons with both women and men, one of the first allusions to Sodom in this context (Abr 133–141), which transformed what was first a shocking instance of intended male rape and thus gross inhospitality into a model of any male-male anal intercourse bequeathing to us the term “sodomy”. Like others Philo assumes that the intended act of sexual violence reflected an endemic problem, which he depicts as “strange and monstrous practices of iniquity and all their heinous acts of impiety aimed at subversion of the statutes of nature” (SpecLeg II 170). “Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of

<sup>30</sup> Loader, Philo (see n. 23), 204–217.156–157.

<sup>31</sup> So Mark D. Smith, *Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26–27*, JAAR 64 (1996) 223–256, here 245; similarly Martin, *Heterosexism* (see n. 21), 56.



their neighbours, but also men mounted males without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive” (Abr 135).

Josephus, too, deplores “pursuit of lawless pleasure” (Ant III 275) by males of males as a Greek disease (Ap II 269), typical of Greek cities (Ap II 273–275), a sentiment shared by many of his hearers in Rome. In similar solidarity he cites such depravity on the part of Antony in relation to Herod’s wife Mariamme, and her brother (Ant XV 25.30; Bell I 439), but also of Herod himself with his eunuchs in later years (Ant XVI 229–230), and of his son, Alexander, who paid to engage with them sexually as an act of subversion (Ant XVI 232; cf. also Bell I 488–492), much as Abner and then Absalom had done in sleeping with Saul’s and David’s concubines.<sup>32</sup> For Josephus, too, same sex relations contravened the divine order of creation and the commandments (Ap II 199). He charged some eunuchs with embracing effeminacy for that purpose (Ant IV 290–291) and alleges that the Zealots copied women’s passions and engaged in cross dressing (Bell IV 561–562).

Beside Paul there is very little pertaining to same sex relations in the early Christian writings collected in the New Testament. The saying of Jesus in Mark 9,42, “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea,” may include child sexual abuse in its purview, to which pederasty would belong, the Greek word *σκανδαλίζω* sometimes referring to sexual wrongdoing (e. g. PsSal 16,7), but the reference to little ones—those who believe in me, may refer to children in the believing community or not refer to children at all. It certainly stands in a context of sayings in Mark 9,43–48 which Matthew uses of sexual wrongdoing in 5,29–30.<sup>33</sup>

It is most unlikely that the anecdote about the centurion’s servant (Matt 8,5–13; Luke 7,1–10) who was dear to him intends an allusion to the servant as his sex slave, let alone that Jesus, knowing this makes no judgement, and so has no problem with it. Such an interpretation would not be supported by the Johannine parallel, which speaks of the official’s son (4,46–54).<sup>34</sup> The reference to “the disciple whom Jesus loved” in John need have no sexual reference.<sup>35</sup> Jesus’ eunuch saying in Matt 19,12 indicates awareness of some men being born as eunuchs, but this has no bearing on their sexual orientation.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Loader, Philo (see n. 23), 306–307.315–316.353–355.

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion in Loader, New Testament (see n. 20), 334.

<sup>34</sup> Loader, New Testament (see n. 20), 336–337.

<sup>35</sup> Loader, New Testament (see n. 20), 337.

<sup>36</sup> Loader, New Testament (see n. 20), 336. J. David Hester, Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities, JSNT 28 (2005) 13–40, who argues that “this logion of Jesus questions the privileged position of a heterosexist binary paradigm of identity” (37). See

There has been much debate about the meaning of the words ἀρσενοκοῖται and μαλακοί which Paul uses in his list of people who gain no entry to the kingdom of God in 1Cor 6,9, the former most likely to include allusion to active male homosexuals “male bedders” and the latter at least to effeminate men, and possibly passive homosexual partners.<sup>37</sup> The use of the former in another list in the deuteropauline 1Tim 1,10–11, where it is associated with slavery, may reflect the world of sexual exploitation.<sup>38</sup> Nothing in these writings suggests departure from the wider Jewish rejection of same sex relations rooted in the Leviticus prohibitions and the understanding of human beings as created either male or female.

## 4 Paul and Gentile Depravity

It is therefore not surprising that Paul chooses to feature same sex relations in his depiction of Gentile world depravity.<sup>39</sup> His Jewishness and faithfulness to Israel is under question. This is, accordingly, the first of many instances where we see him asserting himself against those who would charge him with betraying his tradition. Thus Paul follows his summary of the gospel of which he is not ashamed (1,16–17) by a declaration of God’s anger in 1,18 against all godlessness and wickedness of people in that they pervert the truth about God, whose true nature is revealed in creation (1,19–20) and instead engage in idolatry (1,21–23). In response to their perverted response to God, God gives them up to perversions among themselves.<sup>40</sup> Paul is not of course implying that God is responsible for people’s passions or what they do with them.<sup>41</sup> Paul concludes:

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also Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*, Grand Rapids 2015, 70–83.

**37** Loader, *New Testament* (see n. 20), 326–334.

**38** Loader, *New Testament* (see n. 20), 331–334.

**39** One should not read Paul’s depiction of Gentile depravity as though he overlooks that Israel, too, had sometimes engaged in the idolatrous practices of the nations, as noted above (n. 19), but clearly his primary focus in this passage is Gentile depravity.

**40** On the forensic sense of παρέδωκεν as judgement see Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 166–167; and on the sense of God’s abandoning people to the consequences of their attitude see Fitzmyer, *Romans* (see n. 15), 272; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT), Grand Rapids 1996, 111; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 251; Johannes N. Vorster, *The Making of Male Same-Sex in the Graeco-Roman World and its Implications for the Interpretation of Biblical Discourses*, *Scriptura* 93 (2006) 432–454, here 452.

**41** So Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Notes to Gagnon’s Essay in the Gagnon-Via Two Views Book*, <http://www.robgagnon.net/2VOnlineNotes.htm>, who notes that “it is not quite right to say that same-

Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς· <sup>25</sup>οἵτινες μετέλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὅς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup>because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. (1,24–25)

## 5 The Fall

Already at this stage some things become clear. Paul does not derive same sex relations or having same sex passions from the fall of Adam. The often deeply pastoral attempt to accommodate Paul to current reality sometimes appeals to Adam's sin in order to depict being gay as one of the disabilities which resulted from that event, accordingly to depict being gay as a disability which God's grace can help one live with. While in Paul's thinking all sin and death (and probably much if not all disability) has that as its source,<sup>42</sup> in this particular instance he derives what he clearly sees as a perverted outcome from a perverted response to what we know about God. Paul is not appealing to Adam's sin here.<sup>43</sup> There may be an allusion to the serpent's promise of wisdom to Eve if she eats the forbidden fruit when Paul alludes in 1,22 to people thinking that they were considering themselves wise,<sup>44</sup> but the "fall" here is the result of failing to recognise God, not the fall of Adam and Eve,<sup>45</sup> and has more in common with what is sometimes

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sex intercourse is not a cause, reason, or provocation of God's wrath but only a consequence or result of it" (n. 76); similarly Via, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 13–14; cf. against Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Grand Rapids 1980, 47.

**42** Dunn, *Romans* (see n. 12), 62, who speaks of the fall as the source of human wilfulness; similarly Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 170.

**43** Cf. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Edinburgh 1996, 384.385.388.404–405 n. 21; Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 82, who derives the fact that some have dishonourable passions from the fall (142); Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 285–286.

**44** So Dunn, *Romans* (see n. 12), 60; Dunn, *Theology* (see n. 19), 91.

**45** So Stowers, *Rereading* (see n. 18), 86; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism* (see n. 15), 107; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 254–256 n. 16; Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 136; Swancutt, *Stoics* (see n. 13), 61; Martin, *Heterosexism* (see n. 21), 52–53.

called the “decline-of-civilization narrative”.<sup>46</sup> As Fitzmyer notes, “The alleged echoes of the Adam stories in Genesis are simply nonexistent,” unlike those to Genesis 1.<sup>47</sup>

## 6 Psychology

Paul sees the perverted state of mind, passion, and subsequent expression in acts as the outcome of exchanging what is true for what is false. The motif of change or exchange occurs as a central feature in Paul’s discussion.

ἤλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ  
they exchanged the glory of the immortal God (1,23)  
οἵτινες μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ  
they exchanged the truth about God (1,25)  
μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν  
exchanged natural intercourse (1,26)

Paul’s argument is one about change or perversion which affects not only people’s actions but also their minds. Thus “they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened” (ἀλλ’ ἔματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία) (1,21) is echoed in “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to an unfit mind and to things that should not be done” (Καὶ καθὼς οὐκ ἔδοκίμασαν τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει, παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν, ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα) (1,28). This is at one level a psychological argument, not unfamiliar for Paul, who can cite popular psychological argumentation in Romans 7 and generally deals with the human condition by focusing not just on actions but the mind which produces them, including its need for renewal. It should then already be clear that Paul’s concern is not limited to acts. Rather, as usual in Paul’s anthropology, the focus is on the state of mind which produces them, the root not just the fruit. This is why in Rom 12,2 he speaks, for instance, of the transformation of the mind. It is equally why here he focuses on the perversion of the mind, which shows in misdirected passions and subsequent acts. This runs contrary to those who seek to retrieve a gentler Paul by arguing that only actions matter not attitude and orientation.

<sup>46</sup> So Stowers, *Rereading* (see n. 18), 85, who refers to a parallel in the letter of Anacharsis (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) (98).

<sup>47</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* (see n. 15), 274 writes: “The alleged echoes of the Adam stories in Genesis are simply nonexistent,” unlike those to Genesis 1.

## 7 Passions

Paul speaks not only of corrupted minds but also of passions. It is hard not to believe that Paul had some familiarity with discussions about the danger of passions.<sup>48</sup> In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates warns of the need to tame the wild horse of passion, referring to men finding the boys they mentor sexually attractive (253D; similarly Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* 210–212).<sup>49</sup> While Sparta was best known for its culture of the mentoring of boys which could lead to sexual engagement, to a more limited extent such mentoring was also known and defended in Athenian aristocratic circles and came under question in the context of discussions of the dangers of passions.<sup>50</sup> Pythagoreans argued that procreation was the sole justification for sexual intercourse and warned that passion could damage the soul of the offspring, a view Plato shared (Tim 43C7–D2 and in Leg 775D1–E2). People are not to act like animals.<sup>51</sup> Non procreative sex was contrary to nature. For the early Stoics, Zeno (335–263 BCE) and Chrysippus (280–207 BCE), sexual response was natural and legitimate as long as it was under control. “Mature human action, including sexual behaviour, is regulated by the ἡγεμονικόν, the governing or authoritative capacity of the unified yet manifold human soul”, which makes evaluative assessments and “each assent by the ἡγεμονικόν is also an emotive soul impulse (ὄρμη) to do something, such as the desire to make love”.<sup>52</sup> “What needs to be extirpated is eros as promulgated in popular thought, not eros as a whole”.<sup>53</sup> The later Stoics, Antipater (of Tarsus, ca 133 BCE or of Tyre ca 50 BCE), Musonius, Hierocles, Seneca, and Epictetus, emphasised mutuality and respect in sexual relations which properly belonged within marriage, and became problematic only when driven by excess and self-indulgence, although Seneca and

**48** On this see Loader, *New Testament* (see n. 20), 93–97 and also David E. Fredrickson, *Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros*, in: David L. Balch (ed.), *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, Grand Rapids 2000, 197–222, here 199–204; Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 204.

**49** Bruce S. Thornton, *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, Boulder 1997, 206–212.

**50** Loader, *New Testament* (see n. 20), 383; Thornton, *Eros* (see n. 49), 104–115; Eva Cantarella, *Friendship, Love, and Marriage*, in: George R. Boys-Stones (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*, Oxford 2009, 294–304, here 297–299; and on attitudes of philosophers to pederasty Martha C. Nussbaum, *Eros and Ethical Norms: Philosophers Respond to a Cultural Dilemma*, in: Martha C. Nussbaum/Juha Sihvola (eds.), *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Chicago/London 2002, 55–94.

**51** Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity*, Berkeley 2003, 104.

**52** Gaca, *Fornication* (see n. 51), 72.

**53** Gaca, *Fornication* (see n. 51), 73.

Musonius tend towards the earlier Pythagorean view that legitimizes sexual intercourse as primarily for procreation and sees passion as a plague.<sup>54</sup> While Roman critics declared same sex relations a Greek disease, which Josephus echoes, the Greeks, in turn, condemned the Romans for tolerating such relationships beyond when young men reached marrying age at around 30.<sup>55</sup> Roman law (*Lex Scatinia*) treated such relations between citizens as a criminal offence but allowed it with inferiors (such as non citizens and slaves).<sup>56</sup>

For most Stoics the issue was not passions but their excess.<sup>57</sup> As Ellis notes, “condemnations of sexual desire per se are quite rare. Far more common are, on the one hand, condemnations of sexual immorality (in various forms) and overpowering, excessive, or misdirected desire and, on the other hand, exhortations to self-control”.<sup>58</sup> Most philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans,<sup>59</sup> challenged the fatalistic notion that emotion was something which overwhelmed people from outside against which they had no defence, the stuff of tragedy.<sup>60</sup>

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**54** Gaca, *Fornication* (see n. 51), 92.

**55** Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, Oxford 2005, 212–213.266.

**56** Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, 96–104; Skinner, *Sexuality* (see n. 55), 199–200; Vorster, *Making* (see n. 40), 447.

**57** Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, Grand Rapids 2004, 45. Cf. Dale B. Martin, *Paul Without Passion: On Paul’s Rejection of Desire in Sex and Marriage*, in: *idem*, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, Louisville 2006, 65–76, here 67; similarly David Fredrickson, *Passionless Sex in 1 Thessalonians 4:4–5*, *WW* 23 (2003) 23–30.

**58** J. Edward Ellis, *Paul and Ancient Views of Sexual Desire: Paul’s Sexual Ethics in 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 7 and Romans 1 (LNTS 354)*, London 2007, 95, who notes that specific disapproval of sexual desire and sexual intercourse occurs unambiguously only in the Jewish Sibylline Oracles Book 1 (late first or early second century CE). See also Loader, *Pseudepigrapha* (see n. 22), 68–76.

**59** David Armstrong, “Be Angry and Sin Not”: Philodemus versus the Stoics on Natural Bites and Natural Emotions, in: John T. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought*, London 2008, 79–121 writes: “How hostile were the Stoics and Epicureans to sexual experience and to nonpassionate love? not very” (94) and cites Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton 1994, 140–191, that the Epicurean Lucretius’ discussion of sex in book 4 should not be read as a condemnation of sex and love, but as speaking positively about sex through the life cycle (94–95). See also Skinner, *Sexuality* (see n. 55), 163; Werner Krenkel, *Naturalia non turpia. Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece and Rome – Schriften zur antiken Kultur und Sexualwissenschaft (Spudasmata: Studien zur Klassischen Philologie und ihren Grenzgebieten 113)*, Hildesheim 2006, 143–150.

**60** On this see David E. Aune, *The Problem of the Passions in Cynicism*, in: John T. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought*, London 2008, 48–66, here 54;

As a Jew, Paul is not likely to have condemned desires as such, including sexual desire. Not even Philo could do that. For Paul can assure the Corinthians that to follow one's strong desire and therefore marry is not to sin. For Paul passion or desire is not in itself sinful.<sup>61</sup> It must however be in its rightful place in the order of God's creation as he understands it. The issue is: what is its rightful place?

In our passage Paul refers three times to sexual passion:

Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν

Therefore God gave them up in the desires of their minds (1,24)

Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας

Because of this God gave them up to passions of dishonour (1,26)

ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους

they burned with their passion for one another (1,27)

In 1,24 the formulation indicates that these are passions/desires that belong to or arise from their hearts/minds. Paul has already introduced the psychological notion of the perverted mind in 1,21, so that these are not just neutral passions but passions coming from a corrupted mind. This also finds its echo in 1,28 where Paul writes: παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν, ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα, although there instead of speaking of these passions Paul speaks of their outcome: "deeds that should not be done".

In 1,27 a stock metaphor for strong passion is used, namely burning passion (cf. 1Cor 7,9, but using a different verb: πυροῦσθαι). Paul clearly has strong, excessive passion in mind.<sup>62</sup> He probably shares with Philo the view that the main explanation why men do this is that they have excessive passion which goes then in the wrong direction,<sup>63</sup> on the assumption that mild passion of a man would not

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Gaca, Fornication (see n. 51), 3.65–67; Thornton, Eros (see n. 49), 12–13.23–35; Fredrickson, Use (see n. 48), 207–210.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Martin, Sex (see n. 21 and 57), 59–60.65–76.

<sup>62</sup> So Fredrickson, Use (see n. 48), 213; Via, Homosexuality (see n. 11), 14; Byrne, Romans (see n. 21), 69–70; Dunn, Theology (see n. 19), 120; Brownson, Sexuality (see n. 17), 168.

<sup>63</sup> Brian K. Blount, Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality, in: Choon-Leong Seow (ed.), Homosexuality and Christian Community, Louisville 1996, 28–38 writes: "Both Paul and his contemporaries see homosexual behavior as something freely chosen by an individual. They all associate homosexual behavior with insatiable lust" (34); similarly Jeffrey S. Siker, Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians: New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church, in: Robert L. Brawley (ed.), Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture, Louisville 1996, 137–151, here 142; Walter Wink, Homosexuality and the Bible, in: *idem* (ed.), Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches, Minneapolis 1999, 36; Swancutt, Disease (see n. 13), 210; Swancutt, Stoics (see n. 13), 62.



ever be so directed. Such wayward strong passions stemming from a corrupted mind are neither the inevitable result of the fall of Adam and Eve nor an external force beyond their control, but are without excuse and a sign of distortion for which they are to be held responsible.<sup>64</sup> Paul would have shared disapproval of excessive passion and been suspicious of the dangers of strong passion, although he can accommodate strong passion such as in his advice that those with strong passion should marry and not feel guilty for doing so (1Cor 7,9; similarly 7,28). What for Paul makes these strong passions a manifestation of sin is not so much their intensity or excess<sup>65</sup> but their misdirection.<sup>66</sup> As Ellis puts it, “even if Paul does see homosexual activity as the result of excess, we have no reason to conclude that its association with excess is the reason Paul condemns it.”<sup>67</sup> Paul would equally have condemned misdirected mild homoerotic passion, had he contemplated it as a possibility, which I consider unlikely.<sup>68</sup> Strong and excessive passion did not inevitably lead to its misdirection, but when it is misdirected, that is clearly sin. He holds people responsible for their corrupted mind, their misdirected passions, and their acting them out. They are without excuse. He is not condemning only the act.<sup>69</sup>

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**64** So Nissinen, *Homoeroticism* (see n. 15), 109–111.

**65** Cf. Martin, *Heterosexism* (see n. 21), 59, who sees Paul’s concern as “inordinate passion”. So also Fredrickson, *Use* (see n. 48), 205. “Romans 1:24–27 is not an attack on homosexuality as a violation of divine law but a description of the human condition informed by the philosophic rejection of passionate love” (208). In David E. Fredrickson, *A Friendly, Hellenic response to Professor Saylor, Dialog 44* (2005) 93–94, he writes: “I would argue that rather than reprising Leviticus, Paul exhibits a way of thinking already assumed by many Jews and Greeks in the first century (seen also in Mark 7:14–23): the relocation of purity from the cultic to the moral sphere. Purity means reason’s control of passion (pathos); impurity is passion’s mastery over reason” (93). “Paul chose male same-sex activity as an example of too much desire, not as an example of rebellious humans violating the heterosexual construction of the physical and social universes” (94). “‘Natural use’ was a philosophic commonplace in Paul’s day pertaining to the theme of passion and its control” (94).

**66** So Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 133; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 178, who notes that also Philo and Josephus employed the disapproval of excess, but did so for more fundamental reasons, namely the biblical prohibitions and understanding of creation. Their concerns with procreation, “anatomical complementarity”, “feminization”, and analogy with animals are secondary to these primary concerns (180–181). See also Loader, *Philo* (see n. 23), 204–217, 353–355.

**67** Ellis, *Desire* (see n. 58), 168.

**68** Cf. Martin, *Heterosexism* (see n. 21), 59, who argues that Paul sees all passion as sin, citing 1Thess 4,5 as evidence that men are to engage in passionless sex. On this see Ellis, *Desire* (see n. 58), 168–169, who argues that the issue is not elimination but control.

**69** Cf. Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 133; and the critical response by Via in *Homosexuality and the Bible* (see n. 11), 94.

While Fredrickson suggests that Paul assumes that passions come from outside a person, as in the darts of Cupid,<sup>70</sup> it is more likely that Paul stands in line with those philosophical traditions noted above which resist this and make people responsible for controlling their responses. Indeed for Paul desire itself is not the root cause of the problem, but rather something more, namely the complexities of the human mind. As Jewett observes, “Paul has in mind the LXX understanding of ‘the devices and desires of the heart’ as the complex and devious cross-currents of human motivation that involve the entire person, not just one’s bodily nature.”<sup>71</sup> This makes sense of his psychological approach of depicting such actions, and strong passions misdirected, as the expression of a perverted state of mind.

## 8 Honour and Shame

It is noteworthy that Paul does not just speak of passions but uses the language of shame.

τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς  
to dishonour their bodies among themselves (1,24)  
εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας  
to dishonourable passions (1,26)  
ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι  
males in males committing what is shameful (1,27)

Honour and shame is a much discussed issue. It was frequently seen as shameful for a man to act or be forced to act as a woman, namely to be penetrated by another male. This was used as a form of humiliation in war – and still is. As noted above, Philo writes of the way this corrupts men, feminizing them, thus calling it the female disease. These values would surely have had to be known to Paul and to have been shared by him.

Shame and honour mattered in Paul’s world, especially for men, for whom status and position were a central concern.<sup>72</sup> In the sexual realm this entailed preserving the status of the man as active, the penetrator. To take a passive role,

<sup>70</sup> Fredrickson, *Use* (see n. 48), 207–210.

<sup>71</sup> Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 168.

<sup>72</sup> On this see Moisés Mayordomo-Marín, *Konstruktionen von Männlichkeit in der Antike und der paulinischen Korintherkorrespondenz*, *EvT* 68 (2008) 99–115, who notes its wide applicability in public life (106–109,115).

such as in being anally penetrated, was to be reduced to the level of a woman.<sup>73</sup> It was not so much the genitalia which constituted the difference between men and women. Some even considered women's genitalia as the outside-in version of men's. Rather it was widely held that the female was a defective male, inferior intellectually, emotionally, and physically,<sup>74</sup> reflecting the social reality that most women were married and were married shortly after onset of menstruation to men who were at least 10–15 years their elder and so inevitably experienced and saw women as inferior. To treat a man as a woman was to humiliate him. Rape not just of women but of men was thus a common method of subjugation.

By extension, it could also be argued that to cause another male to be humiliated could also be seen as shameful, though in a different sense.<sup>75</sup> Thus homoerotic passion and its expression was dishonourable for the passive partner, but potentially also for the penetrator. Paul's focus is clearly not just on the passive partner, but on both as εἰς ἀλλήλους (1,27) shows. Conversely, homoerotic passion between women and its expression was offensive because it entailed a woman acting beyond her status as a man.<sup>76</sup>

While Paul does not make specific reference to this value system,<sup>77</sup> we may be sure that he was aware of it. But for Paul there was something more. Such behaviour transgressed what people saw as right order and for Paul that meant the divine order of creation.<sup>78</sup> We see such understanding of gender roles a divine order in his discussions in 1Cor 11,2–6 and also in Rom 7,1–2. Thus for Paul as a Jew, as for Philo, these passions were also shameful because they ran contrary to God's creation. With a high degree of probability Paul's use of θήλειαι "females" and ἄρσενες "males" in 1,26–27 alludes to Gen 1,27.<sup>79</sup> The theme of creation is also

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<sup>73</sup> Skinner, *Sexuality* (see n. 55), 212.249–251; Vorster, *Making* (see n. 40), 449.

<sup>74</sup> Vorster, *Making* (see n. 40), 437–438.

<sup>75</sup> Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 99 citing Epictetus *Discourses* II 10,17. See also Collins, *Sexual Ethics* (see n. 22), 138. Cf. Gerard Loughlin, *Pauline Conversations: Rereading Romans 1 in Christ, Theology and Sexuality* 11 (2004) 72–102, here 92.

<sup>76</sup> Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 216; Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 194–199, who speaks of gender transgression; Jeremy Punt, *Sin as Sex or Sex as Sin? Rom 1:18–32 as First Century CE Theological Argument*, *Neot* 42 (2008) 73–92, here 79.

<sup>77</sup> So rightly the caution expressed by Nolland, *Romans 1:26–27* (see n. 19), 52–53. See also Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 176; Roy Bowen Ward, *Why Unnatural? The Tradition behind Romans 1:26–27*, *HTR* 90 (1997) 263–284, here 279.

<sup>78</sup> So Nolland, *Romans 1:26–27* (see n. 19), 54; cf. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism* (see n. 15), 107, who argues that creation plays only a secondary role in the text.

<sup>79</sup> So Nolland, *Romans 1:26–27* (see n. 19), 49; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 236.290–291; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Key Issues, and Response to Dan O. Via*, in: Dan O. Via/Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, Minneapolis 2003,

reflected in the contrast between creature and Creator in 1,25. Belief in creation and a divinely created order, in turn, informs Paul's expression that such acts are "contrary to nature."

## 9 Nature and Creation

Paul's statements in 1,26 and 27 make reference to nature, another key aspect which must be read in the light of Paul's Jewish and wider Hellenistic context.

αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετέλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν  
 their females exchanged natural sexual intercourse for unnatural (1,26)  
 ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει  
 αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι  
 likewise also males, abandoning natural intercourse with the female burned with passion  
 towards one another, males in males committing what is shameful (1,27)

As noted above, Plato reflects influence of Pythagorean philosophy in seeing the primary purpose of sexual intercourse as procreation. To act otherwise is to act contrary to nature. This view is widely attested, including as we have seen in 2 *Enoch* 10,2; the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (TestNaf 3,4–5; 4,1; cf. also TestLevi 14,6; TestBenj 9,1), the *Testament of Solomon* about Onoskelis perverting men from their true nature, referring probably both to same sex relations and to bestiality; and extensively in Philo. For Philo sexual intercourse which is not for the purpose of procreation is contrary to nature, though like Plato he allows it as legitimate between married persons after the years of fertility (SpecLeg III 35; Plato, Leg 784E3–785A3.783E4–7784B1–3). While he disapproves of sexual intercourse only for pleasure he affirms the role of pleasure in helping promote effective procreation (Opif 151–152.162).<sup>80</sup> Philo also applies the notion of acting contrary to nature to men taking the passive role in intercourse, but also generally to anything which undermines procreation, including engaging in same sex relations which he believes renders men impotent, and seminal emission other

40–92.99–105, here 78; Byrne, *Romans* (see n. 21), 68; Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 174; Innocent Himbaza/Adrian Schenker/Jean-Baptiste Edart, *Clarifications sur l'homosexualité dans la Bible* (Lire la Bible 147), Paris 2007, 88–92; cf. Ulrich B. Mauser, *Creation and Human Sexuality in the New Testament*, in: Robert L. Brawley (ed.), *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, Louisville 1996, 3–16, here 10; Punt, *Sin* (see n. 76), 87 (cf. 77); Wolter, *Römer* (see n. 19), 149.

<sup>80</sup> Loader, *Philo* (see n. 23), 56–60.

than in intercourse with one's wife. However, beyond Plato, Philo understands nature as divinely created order and can therefore appeal to that order while also expounding the prohibitions in Leviticus.

When we turn to Paul, both here and elsewhere in his writings, unlike in Philo, we find no trace of arguments based on procreation,<sup>81</sup> nor of disapproval of sexual intercourse primarily for pleasure.<sup>82</sup> Rather he affirms mutuality of responding to each other's need and desire in 1Cor 7,1–7.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, we recognise that, like Philo, his understanding of nature assumes the divine order of creation, his use of *θήλεια* and *ἄρσενες* reflecting Gen 1,27, doubtless also understood, as in Philo, in association with the Leviticus prohibitions,<sup>84</sup> and this also includes what he would have seen as the divine order in relation to what it meant to be male (active) and female (passive). For Paul as for Philo nature is creation and its order, God's order.<sup>85</sup> Paul reflects assumptions about what is natural and divine order,<sup>86</sup> even applying it to what he deems such right order in relation to women's attire, for which he provides a theological rationale based on creation (1Cor 11,2–16, esp. 11,14),<sup>87</sup> where we might speak in a relativising way of cultural preference or custom.<sup>88</sup>

There is, however, no need to limit the influence on Paul's understanding of nature to a single strand. Some notion of physical complementarity may well have

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**81** So Blount, *Homosexuality* (see n. 63), 35; William R. Schoedel, *Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition*, in: David L. Balch (ed.), *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, Grand Rapids 2000, 43–72, here 48–49; Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 86; Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 83.

**82** Cf. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Chicago 1980, 115.

**83** So Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 176.

**84** So Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 177; similarly Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 275.280–282.294; Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 78; Nolland, *Romans 1:26–27* (see n. 19), 51–52.

**85** Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 82; Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 79; similarly Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 269–271; Winterer, *Sexualität* (see n. 19), 326.

**86** So Hays, *Vision* (see n. 43), 387.405, who points to the connection between nature and law in Josephus *Ap II* 199.273.275 and Philo *SpecLeg III* 37–42; *Abr* 133–141; similarly Andrie B. du Toit, *Paul, Homosexuality and Christian Ethics*, in: David E. Aune (ed.), *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honour of Peder Borgen*, Leiden 2003, 92–107, here 100–101; Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 35.

**87** On this see Loader, *New Testament* (see n. 20), 311–315.

**88** Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 271.238.252; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 356–357; Schoedel, *Same-Sex Eros* (see n. 81), 59.63; cf. Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Louisville 2006, 77; William Stacy Johnson, *Empire and Order: The Gospel and Same-Gender Relationships*, *BTB* 37 (2007) 161–173, here 168; Loughlin, *Conversations* (see n. 75), 97; Punt, *Sin* (see n. 76), 80.

also played a role in his understanding of what is according to nature, common as it is in many discussions, an obvious argument from the observation that, to put it crudely, one thing plugs into another.<sup>89</sup> Beyond that, however, and probably reinforcing it, is the fundamental assumption of Paul the Jew that God made male and female and that they are made to fit each other, so that anything other than that is a misfit and a perversion.

It is also not impossible that the discomfit and sometimes sense of disgust which many heterosexual men acknowledge when confronted with men engaging sexually with other men may play a role in the background. As du Toit observes, in Paul three lines converge: “what the normal, heterosexual majority of his readers, on account of their own sexual orientation, would regard as natural”, then “what the conservatives in the Greco-Roman world, as represented by their moralists, would view as ‘natural’” and thirdly “and decisive would be conformity to the will of God”.<sup>90</sup> He goes on to conclude: “for Paul the decisive indication of what would be ‘natural’ is the man-woman relationship as ordained by God, the creator [...] the term ‘unnatural’ is here, at the deepest level, a theological judgement”.<sup>91</sup>

Attempts have been made to read Paul’s references to nature as not expressing disapproval, but they fail to convince. They include its reduction to mean merely custom, noted above, but also arguments from Paul’s use of *παρὰ φύσιν* in Rom 11,24 to refer to God’s grafting a branch of a wild olive tree onto a cultivated one as something positive.<sup>92</sup> Indeed Paul affirms God’s right to change the order of nature, but here in Romans 1 the opposite occurs: not God but people change the order and so incur divine disapproval. With Boswell, Martin seeks to read *παρὰ φύσιν* in 1,26 as meaning “beyond nature”, namely excessively.<sup>93</sup> As argued above, however, Paul’s primary argument is not about excess in itself but about its direction.<sup>94</sup> Boswell also suggests it might mean beyond what is natural for

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**89** On this see Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 78, who emphasises the “transparent sexual complementarity of males and females”; and Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 88, citing Williams, *Homosexuality* (see n. 56), 242 and Soranus, *On Chronic Diseases* IV 9,131; similarly Peet H. Botha/Fika van Rensburg, *Homosexuality as “Against Nature”: An Interpretation of Romans 1:26–27*, *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 15 (2004) 38–56, here 42. Via, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 95–96 rightly notes that Paul does not employ complementarity in his argument.

**90** du Toit, *Homosexuality* (see n. 86), 100.

**91** du Toit, *Homosexuality*(see n. 86), 101.

**92** Cf. for instance, Johnson, *Empire* (see n. 88), 168.

**93** Martin, *Heterosexism* (see n. 21), 54.56; cf. Boswell, *Homosexuality* (see n. 82), 111–112; Brownson, *Sexuality* (see n. 17), 149–178.

**94** Schoedel, *Same-Sex Eros* (see n. 81), 68 writes: “Precisely the mad quest for pleasure (according to Philo) leads to behavior that breaks all the boundaries and leads to impure forms of

heterosexual men, in the sense of unusual or extraordinary.<sup>95</sup> There is something much more serious here in Romans 1, however, than concern with the unusual and extraordinary, for it warrants divine judgement.

When Paul comes to speak of same sex relations between males in 1,27, “natural intercourse with women” (τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας) is vaginal intercourse and when he writes literally of “males in males” (ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν), the reference is most likely to anal intercourse. As Jewett suggests, anal intercourse might best explain Paul’s additional comment τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες, which would be referring to soreness of the anus or the penis or both.<sup>96</sup> Jewett translates the words τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι as “working (up) shame” and referring to an erection, and ἣν ἔδει as a reference to constriction or tightness, producing the subsequent soreness, citing its use in this sense in Hippocrates. But even without these readings, which may be claiming too much, I consider Jewett’s proposal the most plausible thus far of the many suggestions with regard to the meaning of the words τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες. Paul does appear to assume the principle of matching punishments so that in the broadest sense God’s punishment for human beings’ perverted approach to himself in their minds is abandon them in their minds to a perverted approach to each other. Similarly the perverted activity with the penis and anus produces punishment through soreness of both.<sup>97</sup>

Other explanations include an allusion to Caligula’s demise, his being stabbed through his genitals,<sup>98</sup> which would then require 1,28 to be understood generically as applicable to all such men, an awkward transition. Further suggestions have included that Paul is referring to “feminization”;<sup>99</sup> addiction to same-sex sexual relations;<sup>100</sup> lack of fulfilment;<sup>101</sup> or waste in terms of money and time.<sup>102</sup>

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intercourse. There can be no sharp distinction here between (a) the unnatural as the excess ‘use’ of natural impulses and (b) the unnatural as an affront to the apparent purposes of the parts of the created order”.

**95** Boswell, *Homosexuality* (see n. 82), 111–114. Cf. du Toit *Homosexuality* (see n. 86), 101.

**96** Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 179–180.

**97** This assumes that the πλάνη for which ἀντιμισθία is the punishment is the sexual engagement, but it is arguably more likely to have the whole perversion, including the perverted response to God in mind. So Wolter, *Römer* (see n. 19), 152, who points to similar use in Wis 12,24.

**98** Elliott, *Arrogance* (see n. 17), 79–82; Brownson, *Sexuality* (see n. 17), 157.

**99** Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 211–213; Fredrickson, *Use* (see n. 48), 261–262 n. 20; Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 598.

**100** Byrne, *Romans* (see n. 21), 70; similarly Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 261.

**101** Winterer, *Sexualität* (see n. 19), 290.

**102** Fredrickson, *Use* (see n. 48), 217 observes that in contemporary literature “punishment was



## 10 “Their Females” – An Allusion to Lesbianism?

While in 1,27 Paul is clearly referring to male same-sex relations, and anal intercourse in particular, in expounding the statement in 1,24, there has been some debate about what Paul intends in referring to women’s behaviour in 1,26. It clearly begins by echoing what he said in 1,24 as a comparison shows:

Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας, αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν

Therefore God gave them up to dishonourable passions, their females exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural (1,26)

Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς·

Therefore God gave them up in the passions of their minds to impurity to dishonour their bodies among themselves (1,24)

Given that 1,27 clearly expounds 1,24 as referring to male-male same sex relations, it reads most naturally to see 1,26 as similarly referring to same sex relations, but here applied to women. Then in the words αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν what is natural intercourse is intercourse with the opposite sex and what is contrary to nature refers to same sex relations between women. The connecting phrase at the beginning of 1,27 ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες makes good sense if Paul in 1,27 is similarly talking about the same behaviour as in 1,26, this time between males. As noted above, there is evidence for Jews extrapolating from the Leviticus prohibitions concerning male same sex relations to extend them to female same sex relations, as in Pseudo Phocylides and Philo. It is likely that Paul would also have assumed such an extension.<sup>103</sup> Female to female eroticism was more widely condemned in the Greco-Roman world than male,<sup>104</sup> so that perhaps Paul chose to begin with the most abhorred,<sup>105</sup> but this is uncertain.

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a central metaphor for the ill effects on the lover of his own passionate love [...] taking its toll on finances, mental equilibrium, and the honor of the lover”.

**103** So Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 299; cf. Ward, *Why Unnatural?* (see n. 77), 277–278.

**104** Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 29. “Paul’s depiction of sexual love between women as a result of idolatry resembles Roman representation of such love as foreign” (299).

**105** Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 300.302; Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 174–175.178. This seems more likely than the reverse, namely a transition from a lesser to a greater sin, as Dunn, *Romans* (see n. 12), 64 and other propose; du Toit, *Homosexuality* (see n. 86), 98; Lohse, *Römer* (see n. 12), 90; Martin Hasitschka, *Homosexualität – eine Frage der Schöpfungsordnung*, *ZeitNT* 2 (1998) 54–60, here 57. Such would reflect a later western perspective, not that of the Roman

Hermeneutical considerations potentially play a role in attempts to deny reference to female homoeroticism here, but this should not distract from the fact that serious arguments have been mounted to argue that Paul is indeed somewhat changing the subject here and instead dubbing unnatural not female to female same sex relations, but alternatives to “normal” procreative vaginal intercourse with males,<sup>106</sup> such as oral sex or anal instead of vaginal intercourse, a “contraceptive” practice widely used up until modern times,<sup>107</sup> a critique not otherwise attested in Paul’s day,<sup>108</sup> or even vaginal intercourse where the male is not above the female, or sexual intercourse during pregnancy or menstruation (though hardly enough to warrant the reference to exchange)<sup>109</sup> or masturbation, or, more bizarrely, sex with angels,<sup>110</sup> or with animals.<sup>111</sup> For such interpretations the point of comparison expressed in ὁμοίως “likewise” would refer not to same-sex relations but to intensity of emotions or to general similarity<sup>112</sup> or to concern with thwarting procreation, though the latter, as we have noted, is not elsewhere a concern in Paul. Any proposal which entails assuming a male partner would

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world. Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK), Göttingen 1978, 105 suggests the order reflects the sequence in Genesis 3.

**106** So Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 200.209; similarly Swancutt, *Stoics* (see n. 13), 63; Martin Stowasser, *Homosexualität und Bibel. Exegetische und hermeneutische Überlegungen zu einem schwierigen Thema*, NTS 43 (1997) 503–526, here 516.519; Michael Theobald, *Das Argument ‘contra naturam’ und die Homosexualität (1,26 f): Zur ethischen Normativität der Schöpfungsordnung*, in: *idem*, *Der Römerbrief* (Erträge der Forschung 294), Darmstadt 2000, 142–147, here 144; Winterer, *Sexualität* (see n. 19), 312–313; Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 591–592; J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*, Westport 2006, 131; Hans Debel, “Unnatural Intercourse” in Rom 1,26–27: Homosexual or Heterosexual?, in: Udo Schnelle (ed.), *The Letter to the Romans* (BETL 226), Leuven 2009, 631–640, here 633.636.

**107** So Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (CRINT 3/1), Assen 1990, 94 n. 157; James E. Miller, *The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?*, NovT 37 (1995) 1–11; Fredrickson, *Use* (see n. 48), 201 n. 15.

**108** So Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 248; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 248–250; Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 91.

**109** So Brownson, *Sexuality* (see n. 17), 207–208; Swancutt, *Disease* (see n. 13), 200.209; Swancutt, *Stoics* (see n. 13), 63; Miller, *Practices* (see n. 107), 1–11; Debel, *Intercourse* (see n. 106), 631–640.

**110** So Brinkschröder, *Sodom* (see n. 22), 522, citing the Watchers’ intercourse with women (Gen 6,1–2).

**111** Klaus Haacker, *Exegetische Gesichtspunkte zum Thema Homosexualität*, TBei 25 (1994) 173–180, here 174–175; Keith Dyer, *A Consistent Biblical Approach to “(Homo)-sexuality”*, in: Brian Edgar et al. (eds.), *Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority? Homosexual Practice, Marriage, Ordination, and the Church*, Adelaide 2006, 1–21, here 19. See the critical review of Haacker’s proposal in Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 249–250.

**112** Debel, *Intercourse* (see n. 106), 638.

face the difficulty that males not females take the initiatives in sexual encounters according to the norms of the time.

Given the wider context of 1,24 and 1,27, the allusion to female homoeroticism is much more likely,<sup>113</sup> though this is an instance where one has to be satisfied with degrees of probability.<sup>114</sup> In any case the contrast is of unnatural behaviour with natural. Natural here has to mean in Paul's understanding how God made nature to be, namely that women engage in sexual relations with men not with women and vice versa.<sup>115</sup>

The allusion to the women as αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν “*their females*” might reflect societal control of women by men of the time,<sup>116</sup> but could equally be meant in a broader sense: the females of the human species. While there is no equivalent phrase, “*their males*,” in 1,27, this reflects the understanding that men are the default norm of the species. Similarly while Paul uses the word χρῆσιν in 1,26 and 27, whose etymology reflects the idea that sexual intercourse reflects use by a man of a woman,<sup>117</sup> the etymology probably does not determine its usage here, nor is exploitation Paul's focus in the passage.<sup>118</sup>

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**113** So Collins, *Sexual Ethics* (see n. 22), 142; Fitzmyer, *Romans* (see n. 15), 284; Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 176; Loughlin, *Conversations* (see n. 75), 85. Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago 2001, 255–260 suggests that the focus is female to female cult prostitution; similarly Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 594, but nothing in the context suggests this.

**114** Wolter, *Römer* (see n. 19), 151 writes: “Paulus belässt seine Darstellung vielmehr ganz auf der Ebene der popularphilosophischen Deutung. Es bleibt also eine Leerstelle, und von ihr haben viele Interpreten sich eingeladen gefühlt, sie mit ihren eigenen Vorstellungen aufzufüllen”. But this will also have been the case for those listening to Paul's letter in Rome, who, given the widespread abhorrence of lesbianism, more than probably would have seen Paul as intending such an allusion – and they would probably have been right.

**115** On Paul's understanding of nature and creation see the discussion above.

**116** Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 241; Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 236; Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 177.

**117** Fredrickson, *Use* (see n. 48), 199.202–203; Debel, *Intercourse* (see n. 106), 639.

**118** Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 237.

## 11 Coherence

Paul's argument began with the claim that something went wrong with people's minds. It ends similarly with a claim in 1,28 about unfit minds.

Καὶ καθὼς οὐκ ἔδοκίμασαν τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει,  
παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν, ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα  
And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God,  
God gave them up to an unfit mind, to do what is unseemly (1,28)

There is a deliberate play on words: *ἔδοκίμασαν* and *ἀδόκιμον νοῦν*, which in this way illustrates the principle of matching punishment. As such it also echoes 1,21–22:

ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν  
καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδιά.  
φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν  
they became futile in their thinking  
and their senseless mind was darkened,  
reckoning to be wise they became fools (1,21–22)

This, in turn, is recapitulated in 1,24, which shows that such a mind produces passions which produce dishonourable acts. Paul weaves the whole together with repeated motifs:

God's giving people up  
Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς Therefore God gave them up (1,24)  
Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς Because of this God gave them up (1,26)  
παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς God gave them up (1,28)

Perverted or sick minds  
ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδιά.  
they became futile in their thinking and their senseless mind was darkened (1,21)  
ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν in the desires of their minds (1,24)  
εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν to an unfit mind (1,28)

Dishonourable passions  
ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν  
ἐν αὐτοῖς  
in the desires of their minds to impurity to dishonour their bodies among themselves (1,24)  
εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας to passions of dishonour (1,26)  
ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους they burned with passion towards one  
another (1,27)

## Shameful acts

τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς to dishonour their bodies among themselves (1,24)

τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι committing what is shameful (1,27)  
ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα to do what is unseemly (1,28)

The perverted approach to God results in a perverted mind, which produces passions which head in a perverted direction, producing acts which are contrary to what God intended in nature as divine creation. Paul is not satisfied simply to have used same sex relations to depict human depravity. He supplements it in 1,29–31 with a list of sinful actions and attitudes, concluding with reference to God’s judgement.

οἵτινες τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιγόντες ὅτι οἱ τὰ τοιαῦτα πράσσοντες ἄξιοι θανάτου εἰσίν, οὐ μόνον αὐτὰ ποιοῦσιν ἀλλὰ καὶ συνευδοκοῦσιν τοῖς πράσσουσιν.

who knowing God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, not only do they but even applaud others who practice them. (1,32)

In citing the death penalty for τὰ τοιαῦτα (“such things”) Paul goes beyond what biblical law prescribes for most of the sins listed (exception murder). It is likely therefore that Paul remains focused here on same sex relations, where Lev 20,13 declares the death penalty for lying with a man as with a woman.<sup>119</sup> The fact that he also attacks those who applaud such practices may also reflect that focus, since it is a charge expressed, for instance, by Philo, who was concerned about public support for such practices (e. g. Philo, SpecLeg IV 89; VitCont 53–56.61).

## 12 Misreadings

Some misreadings result from a failure to give priority to a careful analysis of the text and instead taking one’s cue from elsewhere. One such instance is the proposal that Paul’s concern is only with pederasty not with consenting adults. Thus Scroggs pointed to Dover’s research on Greek homosexuality,<sup>120</sup> which, at least in the first edition of his work, emphasised that pederasty was the primary focus for both Jewish and Greco-Roman authors, and so, Scroggs argued, was also Paul’s

**119** Brooten, Love (see n. 19), 283; Gagnon, Practice (see n. 11), 122; cf. Punt, Sin (see n. 76), 76.

**120** Kenneth J. Dover, Greek Homosexuality, Cambridge MA <sup>1</sup>1978, <sup>2</sup>1989.

focus here and in 1Cor 6,9.<sup>121</sup> Accordingly he prefers readings of 1,26 which refer to something other than lesbian relations, for a reference to lesbian relations would not fit his theory.<sup>122</sup> Dover's second revised edition, however, supplements the first by providing evidence that the concerns in both the classical and Hellenistic era extended beyond pederasty and exploitation to include also life long mutual adult same sex relations.<sup>123</sup> My own research of Jewish literature confirms this broader range there, too, including in Philo. More importantly, Paul's own statements speak directly of mutuality. This is clear in 1,27 where he writes: ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους and may already be implied in 1,24 where he writes: τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς. Thus, while Paul may also have pederasty and the exploitation of slaves in mind,<sup>124</sup> the primary focus of his argument lies elsewhere. The same applies to attempts to limit Paul's focus to same sex relations in a cultic setting. Paul does make a connection between idolatry and a perverted sexuality, but his focus in the latter is on the psychology and resultant passions and actions, not cultic location.<sup>125</sup>

The attempt by Boswell to re-read Paul as concerned only with heterosexual men acting contrary to their nature and not with homosexual men acting according to theirs<sup>126</sup> introduces an assumption into Paul's text which it is very unlikely that he would have shared.<sup>127</sup> Not that such distinctions would have

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**121** Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, Philadelphia 1983; Herman C. Waetjen, *Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Antiquity and Sexuality and Sexual Identity in Contemporary American Society*, in: Robert L. Brawley (ed.), *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, Louisville 1996, 103–116, here 107; Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 594.

**122** So Byrne, *Romans* (see n. 21), 76; Collins, *Sexual Ethics* (see n. 22), 144; Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 80; Botha/van Rensburg, *Homosexuality* (see n. 89), 47; cf. Scroggs, *Homosexuality* (see n. 121), 115–116.

**123** On this see Smith, *Bisexuality* (see n. 31), 232–233.245, who also suggests that evidence for pederasty decline after the classical period and the counter by James E. Miller, *Response: Pederasty and Romans 1:27: A Response to Mark Smith*, *JAAR* 65 (1997) 861–866, who draws attention to Martial and the Jewish evidence (863), to which I also drew attention above. See also Gagnon, *Practice* (see n. 11), 330; and Via, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 11, who argue against seeing Paul's focus being limited to pederasty.

**124** So Jewett, *Romans* (see n. 12), 181; cf. Hanks, *Romans* (see n. 1), 587, who sees slave owners as the primary focus.

**125** Cf. Boswell, *Homosexuality* (see n. 82), 108; Ellens, *Sex* (see n. 106), 122.

**126** Boswell, *Homosexuality* (see n. 82), 109; similarly Derrick S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, New York 1955, 157.109; Wink, *Homosexuality* (see n. 63), 36.

**127** Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 101 writes: "Nothing in the language of Rom 1:24–27 suggests that 'homosexuality' is a chosen condition of constitutional heterosexuals".

been unknown to him, as many have argued.<sup>128</sup> On the contrary, Paul would doubtless have known such claims, even if in rudimentary form,<sup>129</sup> whether he directly knew the aetiology proposed by Plato's Aristophanes or not.<sup>130</sup> He would, however, like Philo, have almost certainly rejected such a distinction as in conflict with Gen 1,27 and would have rejected all male same sex relations based on his espousal of the prohibitions of Leviticus. Like Philo, he may well have recognised effemination as a phenomenon, as his allusion to *μᾶλακοί* in 1Cor 6,9 suggests,<sup>131</sup> but this was for him something blameworthy, not a natural state of being.

An alternative is to suggest that Paul embraced such distinctions and so limited his objection only to the acting out of such passion or intent to do so, as Gagnon proposes,<sup>132</sup> but this runs contrary to the gist of Paul's psychological argument. He is concerned with much more than acts. Gagnon's proposal serves hermeneutically to give warrant to a compromise position gaining ground among conservative Christians which affirms gay people and sees their plight as a result of the fall of Adam, a disability, "innate passions perverted by the fall and exacerbated by idol worship,"<sup>133</sup> and requires only that they remain celibate.<sup>134</sup> This is much less than Paul's argument requires. Paul deplores perverted minds which fail to acknowledge God, but turn instead to idols, and shows that God inflicted a matching perversity on these same people's minds, the result of which is strong misdirected passions and resultant behaviour.<sup>135</sup>

**128** Cf. Hays, *Vision* (see n. 43), 388; similarly Collins, *Sexual Ethics* (see n. 22), 142.

**129** So du Toit, *Homosexuality* (see n. 86), 103–104.

**130** See the discussion of evidence of such awareness in Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 8–9, 157–159, 162–171; Smith, *Bisexuality* (see n. 31), 225; Via, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 16.

**131** Gagnon, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 102; Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 136, 138.

**132** Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 136. Brooten, *Love* (see n. 19), 244 comments: "Paul could have believed that *tribades*, the ancient *kinaidoi*, and other sexually unorthodox persons were born that way and yet still condemn them as unnatural and shameful. [...] I believe that Paul used the word 'exchanged' to indicate that people knew the natural sexual order of the universe and left it behind. [...] I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God".

**133** Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 142.

**134** This view is reflected in Gagnon, *Notes* (see n. 41), 133: "The exchange and leaving behind (1:26–27) refer not to a choice of homosexual desire over heterosexual desire but to a choice of behavior stimulated by disoriented passions over behaviour motivated by nature. Nature in this context is male-female complementarity clearly revealed in the material creation. Collectively, the language of exchanged, leaving behind, God gave them over, desire, and inflamed with their yearning suggests passions that are pre-existing, controlling, and exclusive". Against limiting the focus to behaviours see Via, *Homosexuality* (see n. 11), 94.

**135** Hays, *Vision* (see n. 43), 386 highlights the "direct parallelism between the rejection of God and the rejection of created sexual roles"; so also Waetjen, *Relations* (see n. 121), 111.



A misreading also occurs when the focus of exegetes falls primarily on the strength of the passions and not their direction, as though Paul might have approved of same sex relations as long as the associated passions were not too strong. This is to read Paul without taking sufficiently into account his strong Jewish background and the text itself which, as we have shown, is concerned with more than strong passions. While Paul does not cite drunken parties as fueling indiscriminate sexual indulgence by men with both women and men, as does Philo, it is very likely, as we have argued, that he would explain the misdirection of passion as the result of its being strong and conversely have assumed that normally men and women would be attracted only to their own in accordance with the created order.

Similarly a distortion occurs when people read Paul primarily through the lens of concern with honour and shame. This concern is certainly reflected in what he writes, but it has to be understood within Paul's Jewish theological frame of reference according to which something more is at stake than honour or shame or, to put it differently, issues of honour and shame are inseparable from concern with the divine order of nature as God's creation. Honour and shame values certainly inform how Paul sees that divine order, but the dishonourable relates now not just to the passive partner but to both and the shame not just to being or making passive but to breaching a divine prohibition and going against God's creation of male and female and its implications for sexual engagement with the opposite sex and not with one's own.

The primary focus of all readings must be the text, not read in isolation from its world, but read in the light of it, which in Paul's case means what we can discern as the religious and cultural context which influences him as a self-conscious Jew, engaged with his tradition, and as a diaspora Jew of the Greco-Roman world open to its influences.

## 13 Conclusions

There is a coherence in Paul's argumentation. Assumptions about the nature of creation, male and female, and about what is prohibited, combine with views about the danger of strong passions leading people astray (in the wrong direction), honour and dishonour (measured by what pleases God), to enable Paul to invite the Roman hearers of his letter to sense common ground in condemning what they too would have condemned on the same basis. The basic assumption is that human beings are male or female, in our terms, heterosexual, as the creator intended, and anything other than that is a distortion which deserves condemna-

tion.<sup>136</sup> In this understandable system of thought there is no room for people in any sense being naturally homosexual in our terms. While Paul will have known of such claims, with high probability he would like Philo have rejected them.

One can read Paul with respect even though one may disagree with his assumptions, as today most people do who affirm that being gay is not a sign of perversion, whether they then still retain the validity of the Leviticus prohibitions or see them, too, as not applicable, as do I.<sup>137</sup>

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**136** du Toit, Homosexuality (see n. 86), 103 observes: “Paul is arguing in universal categories, and he condemns homosexual desire and actions as morally wrong, whether they are committed by homosexuals or heterosexuals, by adults or minors”. Paul “lumps all forms of same-sex eros together as a mark of Gentile decadence” – so Schoedel, Same-Sex Eros (see n. 81), 68. David J. Lull, Jesus, Paul, and Homosexuals, *CurTM* 34 (2007) 199–207 writes: “Paul did mean to condemn all same-sex sexual intercourse, but in doing so he was merely echoing his own culture’s concepts of human sexuality” (201). For Paul this was “contrary to the order of the world as created by God” – so Via, Homosexuality (see n. 11), 14. See also Smith, Bisexuality (see n. 31), 246; Brooten, Love (see n. 19), 217; Gagnon, Homosexuality (see n. 11), 81, who writes of Paul “casting his net over every kind of consensual homoerotic activity”; Himbaza/Schenker/Edart, Clarifications (see n. 79), 104.

**137** Cf. David L. Balch, Concluding Observations by the Editor, Including a Comparison of Christian and Jewish Biblical Interpretation, in: *idem* (ed.), Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture, *Grand Rapids* 2000, 278–304, who observes: “Both Leviticus and Romans make ancient ‘scientific’ assumptions about nature and gender that neither conservative nor progressive scholars could accept today” (299).