

Same-Sex Relations: Listening to First Century Voices

William Loader¹

It is somewhat fortuitous that we have in the New Testament some reference to same-sex relations. This happened because Paul wanted to cite what he could assume his hearers would most agree with him in condemning in order to introduce an argument that in fact all people fall under God's condemnation – not only those Gentiles, but also Jews. He packs a lot into the four relevant verses in Romans (1:24, 26-28), but leaves much unexplained because it needed no explanation. Fortunately he is not the only Jew of his time to address the issue and other Jews were not so terse. Our best resource for extensive comment is his contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, who happily engages at the interface of Jewish and Hellenistic Roman culture in a way that enables us to recognise perspectives informing his thought from both sources. While we cannot assume that Alexandria's Philo and Tarsus' Paul would have necessarily shared the same perspectives in such matters, it is clear that they have much in common, so that Philo provides a helpful entry into the biblical texts. He has the advantage of not being considered inspired and authoritative and so being less laden with the distorting hopes and fears which that brings.

In his account of the Therapeuts, mostly people of senior age, men and women who live in celibacy on the shores of Lake Mareotis near Alexandria, in reflection and contemplation, Philo contrasts their holy feasts with the unholy parties of his day. "For waiting there," he writes, "are slaves of the utmost comeliness and beauty, giving the idea that they have come not so much to render service as to give pleasure to the eyes of the beholders by appearing on the scene" (*Contempl.* 50). He then describes some "who are still boys" and others "full-grown lads fresh from the bath and smooth shaven, with their faces smeared with cosmetics and paint under the eyelids and the hair of the head prettily plaited and tightly bound" (*Contempl.* 50; similarly described in *Spec.* 3.37). "In the background are others, grown lads newly bearded with the down just blooming on their cheeks, recently pets of the pederasts, elaborately dressed up for the heavier services, a proof of the opulence of the hosts as those who employ them know, but in reality of their bad taste" (*Contempl.* 52). He goes on to describe the gluttony and drunkenness typical of such occasions and the sexual profligacy which ensues (*Contempl.* 53-56; cf. also *Abr.* 134-135; *Somn.* 1.122-125; *Ebr.* 21). Elsewhere he describes the men at such parties as typically engaging in indiscriminate sex with both women and men or boys (*Spec.* 2.50; *Legat.* 14). He describes the men of Sodom similarly, as engaged both in adultery and in mounting other males, as he puts it (*Abr.* 133-141).

Already we see three important elements in Philo's discussion. Same-sex acts happen primarily in wild drunken parties. They are simply part of profligate sexual response: the

¹ For an extensive discussion see William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012)

same men also engage in adultery (similarly Josephus *A.J.* 3.275). The passive partners are frequently slaves, exploited for the purpose, made to look like women, functioning in many instances as male prostitutes, and ranging in age from puberty to maturity. At Sodom Philo assumes adults are engaged in such acts. Sodom is associated with unnatural and strange sexual behaviour also in *Her.* 77; *Fug.* 144; *Post.* 52; *Spec.* 2.170; *Mos.* 2.55; and *Conf.* 40.

In the context of his discourse about the Therapeuts Philo goes on to speak rather disparagingly of the Symposiums of Xenophon and of Plato, citing from the latter the myth of Aristophanes (*Contempl.* 57-63; cf. Xenophon, *Symp.* 2; Plato *Symposium* 189-193). The myth is an aetiology of sexuality according to which humans once existed as male, female, and androgynous. Because of their insolence Zeus cut each in half, so that ever since the halves have sought each other, those deriving from the androgynous being seeking their opposite, thus males seeking females, and females, males, and the other two producing the phenomenon of males seeking males as their other half, and females seeking females as their other half. This theory of the origins of heterosexuality and homosexuality, male and female, put by Plato on the lips of Aristophanes and not reflecting his own convictions, receives short shrift in Philo. Philo notes that it is “seductive enough, calculated by the novelty of the notion to beguile the ear”, but to be treated by “the disciples of Moses trained from their earliest years to love the truth ... with supreme contempt” (*Contempl.* 63). The disciples of Moses know that God made humankind male and female and that while their God also engaged in a kind of surgery, the creation of woman was not a rash stroke of anger but divine purpose. They also know that their Moses forbade lying with a man as with a woman as an abomination (Lev 18:22; 20:13). In his exposition of Mosaic law (*Spec.* 3.37-42) Philo not only cites the sentence of death mandated in Lev 20:13, but insists it should be immediate (*Spec.* 3.38).

Aristophanes’ myth is evidence that some did indeed see what we would call a homosexual orientation as natural, but such belief was relatively rare, and unlikely to find any more assent among Jews in general than it did with Philo. Philo bolsters his conviction, rooted in the biblical prohibition, with arguments reflecting significant values of his day. He repeatedly depicts same-sex relations between men as demeaning, especially of the man taking the passive role, assuming anal intercourse. He speaks of feminisation of boys and young men, producing men who are effeminate, what he calls the “female disease” (θήλειαν ... νόσον) (*Abr.* 136; *Prob.* 124). That is serious because women are inferior in his and his contemporaries’ view. It is serious for other reasons, too. Like Plato, Philo believed that such behaviour threatened the survival of the species. If semen is wasted – and their view was that it was in limited supply – and the semen available not planted in the fertile field of women’s wombs, cities could be devastated through falling population (*Contempl.* 62; *Spec.* 3.32-33, 39; *Abr.* 136-137; *Anim.* 49). *Pseudo-Aristeas* asserts the same concern. More serious still, men made effeminate in this way become impotent according to Philo (*Abr.* 135; *Spec.* 3.37).

They also lose their virility in a broader sense, becoming weaklings, the very antithesis of what Roman culture hailed as the male ideal. Philo embraces the typical Roman disdain for what they called the Greek disease, especially its pederastic form (so also Josephus *Ap.* 2.269). Same-sex exploitation of young male citizens was *stuprum*, forbidden by Roman law. The Greeks in turn despised the Roman practice of nevertheless engaging in same-sex relations with slaves and non-citizens way past the age when men were expected to marry and produce offspring for society, the cut-off stage as Greeks saw it.

Both the shameful passive partner, reduced to the level of a woman, and the active male, subverting the order of nature, divine order, were to be condemned according to Philo. When he explores the grounds for such madness he returns to the excess of the wild parties, where men spurred on by alcohol lose control of their passions, which then control them and produce their profligate behaviour (*Spec.* 3.40). He also deplores the social acceptance given such people in public ceremonies (*Spec.* 3.40-41). Though he makes little mention of it, Philo also condemns women similarly for acting contrary to their nature in lesbian pursuits (*QG* 2.49; *Virt.* 20-21; *Her.* 274).

Like idolatry, same-sex relations were seen as evils typical of pagan society, as they had been for centuries, attested already in Leviticus 18 which warns against the practices: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you” (Lev 18:3). Most allusions in the period under our consideration come from contexts where Jews faced the need for such demarcation. Thus *Aristeas* decries male prostitution and fears depopulation as a result (152; cf. also 108; 130). *Pseudo-Phocylides* argues against both male and female same sex intercourse (190-192), condemning it as an extension of the prohibition of adultery (3), and cautions parents about braiding boys’ hair in the light of male sexual predators (210-214). He cites Plato’s argument that not even in the animal kingdom does one find such behaviour – at least they thought so then (191, cf. Plato *Leg.* 836C).

The sibyl in *Sibylline Oracles* 3 lambasts Rome for its sexual exploitation and institutes of male prostitution (3:185-187, 596-599, 764), as later do the authors of books 4 (4:33-34) and 5 (5:166-168 targets Rome for its “adulteries and illicit intercourse with boys” as an “effeminate and unjust, evil city” and “unclean” (similarly 5:387; cf. also 5:430). 2 Enoch condemns “sin which is against nature, which is child corruption in the anus in the manner of Sodom” (10:2) and the wickedness of those sowing worthless seed, including “abominable fornications, that is, friend with friend in the anus, and every other kind of wicked uncleanness which it is disgusting to report” (34:1-2 MS P). *Apoc. Abr.* 24:8, describes what is apparently adult to adult male consensual same-sex relations, not in anal intercourse, but where naked men stand forehead to forehead. Wis 14:26 is probably alluding to male same-sex relations, depicting it, like Paul as perversion, matching the perversion by idolaters of the true nature of God. There may be an allusion to lesbian relations in the surprising comment about Aseneth in *Joseph and Aseneth*, where after

describing her being kept from male eyes, couped up in defensive towers and attended by seven virgins her own age, we read that note that no one, not even her virgin attendants, ever sat on her bed (2:9; Ph 2:16).

Josephus recounts the behaviour of Antony, fame consort of Cleopatra (*A.J.* 15.22-35). His agent visited Jerusalem and was so impressed with the beauty of Mariamme, Herod's Hasmonean wife, and with her brother, the 16 year old Aristobulus, that he has paintings made of them (In the Jewish war he says the initiative was Mariamme's mother, Alexandra – *B.J.* 1.439). They so impressed Antony that he planned to summon both to Alexandria to meet his sexual predatory ambitions. Herod, shocked on hearing this, quickly sacked the high priest whom he had appointed and made Aristobulus high priest, an office which forbade incumbents leaving the land, and Antony finally came to his senses and pulled back from the outrageous ambition to sleep with Herod's wife. Antony's sexual predation was typical of the time – promiscuity directed to both women and men.

Before turning to Paul, let me note briefly that at most there is one further likely reference same-sex relations in the New Testament, namely in the form of pederasty, in the warning attributed to Jesus against causing little ones to stumble, a word used also in sexual contexts (Mark 9:42). The warning comes along with stark advice to lop off limbs or pluck out eyes to prevent oneself sinning (9:43-48), applied by Matthew already in the Sermon on the Mount with specific reference to sexual wrongdoing (5:30). Otherwise some may have heard the anecdote about bringing children to Jesus that he may touch them (Mark 10:13-15), as having sexual reference, and so understood the vehemence of the disciples' response, but we have no evidence that it was heard this way. I do not see the saying about being a eunuch from birth (Matt 19:12) as referring to same-sex orientation. Eunuchs were impotent and could not sustain an erection, but could otherwise be sexually active in relation to both women and men and frequently were.

Aside from Romans we have reference to ἀρσενοκοῖται and μαλακοί in the list of those excluded from the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10), best understood as active and passive partners in same sex intercourse, “male-bedders” and “softies”, a term used also more widely of effeminacy. The former word appears in the list found in the deutero-Pauline 1 Timothy 1:10 and may have been a neologism based on the Greek text of Lev 18:22.

Turning to Romans, as indicated above, we have reference to same-sex relations in four verses, 1:24, 26-28, as part of a broader argument which reaches from 1:16 – 3:27. About to visit Rome, whose Christian community was founded by others and where people had heard of Paul as a controversial figure, he sets out to explain what he confidently preached as gospel. “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ (1:16-17). He returns to this claim in 3:21-22 “But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets,”²² the

righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” In between, in 1:18 – 3:20, he establishes that all have need of God’s saving righteousness because all have sinned. The “all” encompasses both Jews and Gentiles. The inclusion of Jews was an important part of the argument, because it enabled him to argue that they need the gospel just as much as Gentiles and their privileged position as bearers of holy tradition did not exempt them from this. We see Paul’s intention already in 3:9 where he declares: “What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin”.

He reaches this point by first declaring God’s anger against what all his hearers, as Jews or proselytes, converted Gentiles, would have seen as abhorrent: same-sex intercourse. It was, as we have seen, along with idolatry, one of the aspects of Gentile culture which Jews most despised. By the end of Romans 1 Paul has broadened the focus to all sins. In typically rhetorical style he then turns in 2:1 on hearers who judge others while doing the same things themselves. This need not already have Jewish hearers in mind, but by 2:9-10 he makes it clear that he wants his hearers’ assent to the statement that all must face God’s judgement and be judged on the same basis, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. He then deals directly with Jews (2:17), consolidating his case that if they, too, are trapped in sin, then, they, too, need the gospel – which Paul has been preaching. He will have more to explain, including what then is left of their special status.

Our focus is his statements about same-sex intercourse, which, in effect, are incidental to his argument. Had he chosen something else like the closely related drunkenness we would have been left with virtually nothing about same sex relations in the New Testament. It is not possible to review all the various approaches to Paul’s statements here, many of them serving hermeneutical interests in support for or opposition to stances in debates on the issue today.

William Countryman rightly notes rejection of same-sex intercourse as one of the markers of being a Jew, along with circumcision and food laws. He suggests that Paul cites such rejection here only to reject it, as he does the demand for circumcision and observance of food laws. Countryman argues that the sins Paul opposes are only those listed at the end of the chapter. But this is not the impression Paul gives when he appears quite serious in correlating same-sex intercourse as perversion with perversion of belief in God into belief in idols. Dale Martin suggests that Paul in any case rejects all sexual passion, but this scarcely does justice to Paul’s comments elsewhere, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul is at pains to emphasise that following one’s sexual desire to the conclusion that one marry is not a sin. John Boswell, followed by Walter Wink, had argued that Paul is writing only about heterosexual men who engage in such acts, not homosexuals, but, as we have seen it is highly unlikely that Paul would have differed from all other Jews of the time whose writings survive, who rejected such distinctions. Nor does it make sense to argue that Paul is only

concerned with same-sex acts in cultic contexts. For his focus is not just acts but attitude and ultimately, mind, which is independent of location.

Robin Scroggs, noting the prominence of sexual predation of the young, suggested that Paul was primarily addressing pederasty, not same-sex relations between consenting adults. But both were roundly condemned by contemporary Jews and Paul's reference in 1:27 about having passion for one another suggests that he, too, included consenting adults in his judgement. This also counts against restricting the application Paul's comments to male prostitution and its use. Diane Swancutt suggests that the charge of hypocrisy which comes in 2:1 suggests that Paul is aware of the critique made against some Roman Stoics that they taught against such practices but were themselves engaged in questionable relations with their students. That is possible, though clearly Paul's primary focus is the issue of the sinfulness of all humanity, including Jews, rather than particular teachers in the imperial city.

Robert Gagnon differentiates, as do many in current debates, between homosexual orientation and the act of intercourse, arguing that Paul's focus is the latter not the former. He goes beyond Romans 1 to speculate that Paul would have believed that there were homosexual people and that their condition was a product of the fall. Such an approach often then serves a hermeneutic which acknowledges such orientation but declares that such people should not give expression to their sexuality because scripture terms it an abomination. What appears an attempt to be kind – namely in recognising the orientation – is in fact very cruel. It is, in any case, likely that Paul along with Philo and other Jews of his time would have rejected the categories, homosexual and heterosexual. As we shall see, Paul sees not just the act but also misdirected and intense passion as a manifestation of sin.

Some give special emphasis to honour-shame values, arguing that Paul's stance derives from the perspective we noted above in Philo and elsewhere, that such behaviour undermines masculinity, reducing the passive partner to the level of a woman. If so, he blames both partners as engaging in shameful behaviour. But like Philo, Paul's stance is also firmly biblically based, as his allusions to Gen 1:27 and likely allusion to the penalty of death in Lev 20:13 indicate. Nevertheless when Paul deems such behaviour unnatural, he most probably has in mind the way God created male and female to be, and that, for him, included what we would recognise as cultural assumptions about behaviour and dress, such as head covering, as part of God's ordering of creation, which should not be subverted from its nature as given by God.

Turning directly to the texts, we read in 1:24

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves.

Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς· 1:24

“Therefore” (Διὸ) is explained in the following verse, which summarises 1:19-23

²⁵because 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.

οἵτινες μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὅς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν

As in Wisdom (13:1 – 14:31; similarly 1 Thess 4:5; 1 Cor 10:7-8), the argument is that a perverted understanding of God, denying God’s true nature, results in a perverted understanding of oneself, denying one’s own true nature as male or female. Paul is not citing the fall in the garden of Eden as the cause, but idolatry; nor is he concerned only with acts in idolatrous contexts.

Paul repeats various compounds of the word for “exchange”:

ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ
they exchanged the glory of the immortal God (1:23)

μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ
they exchanged the truth about God (1:25)

μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν
exchanged natural intercourse (1:26)

“God gave them up” means God abandoned them to their sinful perversions, including with a view to their suffering the consequences, in that sense, an expression of God’s anger. This is not an excuse, as though they cannot help themselves having such a mind with dishonourable desires and passions. On the contrary, as in 1:20, they are ἀναπολογήτους (“without excuse”), so that their psychological state in 1:24, 26-28 is deemed blameworthy.

“In the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν (lit. “in the desires of their hearts/minds”) is the first of three references to sexual desire. 1:26 mentions “degrading passions” εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας (“into passions of dishonour”); 1:27, being “consumed with passion”, “burning with passion” ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους (“they burned in passion for one another”). These passions, as misdirected to their own sex and as excessive are, in Paul’s view, not a natural orientation to be tolerated (as God created passions, which are in that sense good and bad only when misdirected), but a perversion to be condemned. Something goes wrong in both mind and action. The danger of intense passion appears then to inform his thought as it did that of many who dabbled in such psychology. So in 1:21 Paul wrote: ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία (“they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened”) and in 1:28 Paul states: God gave them up to an *unfit* mind and to things that should not be done” (παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν). The focus is not primarily or solely excess, as Martin suggests,

but the misdirection it inevitably entails. It is highly likely that in speaking of men being carried away by passion, Paul has similar scenarios in mind to those mentioned in Philo, namely, parties where people get drunk and engage indiscriminately in profligate acts of sexual indulgence.

“the degrading of their bodies among themselves” This dishonouring relates to behaviour which reduces the passive part to the level of a woman, contrary both to society’s norms and to creation. “Among themselves” (ἐν αὐτοῖς) indicates like “for one another” (εἰς ἀλλήλους), that this is mutual and brings shame also on the active partner whose action brings shame to the other.

Paul repeats the claim in 1:26.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women (lit. females) exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural. (Rom 1:26)

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

The “their” in “their females” might refer to men as owning or controlling women, but more probably refers to those human beings as a group who have denied God’s reality. Paul would nevertheless share the common view that women belonged to men, so that the phrase probably means more than simply: the women among them. There is no equivalent phrase, “their males,” in 1:27. Some have seen in the words, “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” a reference to bestiality, women being penetrated by animals, an equally abhorrent notion for Jews, or anal intercourse as a form of contraception. More likely it is a rare reference to same-sex relations between women, something we noted that both Philo and *Pseudo-Phocylides* condemned and which was generally abhorred also in Greek and Roman culture. “Natural intercourse” is intercourse with men. “Unnatural” is women having intercourse with women. Paul continues with the corresponding male behaviour, indicated by ὁμοίως (“in the same way”):

²⁷and in the same way also the men (lit. males), giving up natural intercourse with women (lit. intercourse with the female), were consumed with passion for one another. Men (lit. males) committed shameless acts with men (lit. males) and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες.

“Natural intercourse” indicates what is natural for men and women. In using the words, “male” and “female”, Paul alludes to Gen 1:27, “male and female he created them”, obscured in the NRSV. As noted above, nature will refer to how Paul understands the divine

order of creation, including male and female roles. In Plato's objection to same-sex intercourse "nature", "according to nature", refers above all to procreation and as we saw this is also a major theme in Philo, who shares the worry about wasted semen and depopulation, although for him, too, nature alludes to how God created male and female and the active and passive roles they are to fulfil in sexual intercourse. Paul nowhere uses the procreation argument to combat sexual wrongdoing, homosexual or heterosexual. While because of effective contraception we today can separate engaging in sexual intercourse as an expression of love and intimacy from doing so also for purposes of procreation in practice and so therefore in thought, in the ancient world this was not so. Engaging in sexual intercourse as an expression of intimacy and doing so for procreation inevitably belonged more closely together, so that both aspects are usually to be assumed where sexual intercourse is mentioned. On the other hand, clearly here as elsewhere Paul focuses on the aspect of sexual intimacy, not on procreation, and so does not use the depopulation argument here.

Paul continues:

Men (lit. males) committed shameless acts with men (lit. males) and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἦν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες.

ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν (lit. "males in males") may well be meant literally and allude to anal intercourse. Again we note the shame motif as in 1:24 ("dishonouring their bodies") and 1:26 ("passions of dishonour"). What the "due penalty" was which they received for their error, or better, their going astray (beginning with their idolatry), is not immediately clear and so has been subject of speculation. I find Robert Jewett's explanation the best so far, that it refers specifically to penis and anal soreness, but other possibilities include feminisation, waste of money and time, addiction, or lack of fulfilment. Nothing is said of consequences for women.

Finally Paul returns in 1:28 to the nub of his argument:

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 1:28

The reference of "things that should not be done" is obvious. The focus is, again, not just the acts, but the debased mind, the perverted orientation of passions. Paul's focus is always sin, not just sins. Paul plays with words: *ἔδοκίμασαν ἀδόκιμον* ("did not see fit" and "an unfit mind"). The same kind of psychological focus appeared in the primary failure to acknowledge God in 1:18-23, where Paul writes: "they became futile in their thinking and

their senseless minds were darkened” (ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία) (1:21).

Paul then broadens his scope:

“They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents,³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.³² They know God’s decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them.” (1:29-32)

The reference to death may well allude to the death penalty prescribed for same sex intercourse in Lev 20:13.

As Andrie du Toit points out, Paul is not making same-sex intercourse the pinnacle of all evil, but employing it as an instance to further his argument that all have sinned. We might want to put the greed of the wealthy up there or some other much more far-reaching evil. Aside from the list in 1 Cor 6:9-10 Paul never mentions the topic elsewhere, though it will have been included in his allusions to sexual wrongdoing, which regularly feature.

The temptation to modernise Paul either by explaining away his comments as applicable to only special instances or by transforming his comments on desires into neutral pathology or natural sexual orientation is to be resisted. Paul, almost certainly, believed that all men were heterosexual and that accordingly attitudes and behaviours which moved away from what God made males and females to be and do were manifestations of gross sin and assumed his hearers would totally agree with him. I use “almost” simply because historical reconstruction cannot escape being a matter of probabilities. In this instance we well along the high end of the probability scale. Paul’s views are to be respected and make good sense, given his assumptions.

It is quite another question whether we view these common Jewish assumptions as sufficient to account for what we observe as the phenomenon of people having sexual orientation to those of their own sex today. In some instances his assessment will be directly applicable. Deliberate perversion, not least in the context of extravagance and abuse of alcohol, has its contemporary equivalents today and should, with Paul, be seen for what it is. There is an increasing acceptance of the view that for others with same sex orientation we are not dealing with such perversion but with what comes close to being their natural state.

The matter is complex. The appearance of sexual genitalia seems at first sight to make matters simple, and is a good guide for the majority of the population, but even at a physical level not everyone is born with unambiguous genitalia and beyond that for some, their life-long sexual orientation does not match their appearance and for others the orientation may

not remain constant, such complexities giving rise to the acronym GLBTI (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex) and even then a simplification.

In dealing with such texts today I identify three main options.

1. Embrace Paul's view that the same-sex mind/orientation/desire and action is a sinful perversion comparable to idolatry.

Then one should require such people in a spirit of love and compassion not to express their sexuality but to seek healing. Gay marriage would be to institutionalise a pathology. Leadership in the church is acceptable only when such people embrace celibacy and are well on the way to healing. This option has been the most widely held one over history, as long as people have continued to share Paul's view of same-sex orientation and action. For those for whom biblical authority is foundational to their faith it provides an option where they can claim that they are being faithful to scripture and tradition. Those espousing this option offer healing and change as options to people so affected. Advocates of this position can face issues of consistency. While some also affirm biblical views about women's subordination and leadership and about matters like divorce, most concede that those teachings are overridden by other gospel values, but balk at doing so in relation to homosexual people. People taking this option are being faced with the challenge that there is increasing recognition in many societies, including at levels of government, that there are some people whose sexual orientation appears not to reflect perversion as Paul and many Christians have assumed and that there are many highly respected fellow citizens who are genuinely homosexual. Most therefore who start within this first option trend towards the next.

2. Embrace Paul's view that same-sex acts are sin as Leviticus states, but not his view of sexual orientation, acknowledging that there are some genuinely same-sex oriented people.

One would nevertheless still require celibacy on the basis that same-sex acts are forbidden and response to gay marriage and leadership would be as option 1. Some like Gagnon argue that this is Paul's option, but that is based on false assumptions and a denial of Paul's focus which is not just on acts but on orientation. A variation of this view which lies halfway between Option 1 and 2 is not to embrace Paul's view on sexual orientation but also not to acknowledge that some people are genuinely same-sex in orientation, but see such orientation as a pathology. The same consequences follow in relation to gay marriage and leadership. This approach avoids the serious ethical problem which arises from the option which accepts same-sex orientation as natural for some but then demands it never find expression – ultimately a cruel and potentially dangerous option.

The serious ethical problem about an approach which concedes that a same-sex orientation may be God-given or at least natural and not evil in itself, or at most the outcome of the fall of Adam, is that it leaves itself without any viable defence against the charge of injustice

when it blocks people from bringing to expression what it agrees are legitimate feelings. Unlike the stance which sees same-sex acts as arising from pathology or perversion and therefore follows the prohibitions in opposing them, it is hard to see why those recognising same-sex orientation and desires as legitimate oppose their expression in responsible and loving acts of intercourse. With all the biblical and other grounds for seeing them as such surrendered to modern insight in agreeing to the legitimacy of the desires, such an approach paints itself into a corner and really has no plausible answer to why the acts must not be allowed. It amounts to upholding the biblical prohibition while rejecting its biblical rationale. This then becomes an ethical issue which people advocating it must face. To impose biblical commands while rejecting biblical rationales (as in Option 2) is to act in a way that seems ethically irresponsible, but it happens where people find themselves unable to engage the biblical record critically. The approach which upholds the prohibitions on the basis of arguing from pathology or as Paul from perversion are not as vulnerable to the charge of lacking ethical integrity.

Sometimes the ethical tension is dramatically evident where on the one hand great sensitivity is shown to the queer community, including both listening and presenting their viewpoint in the discussion, even to the point of acknowledging its validity and the complexity of sexual orientation which cannot be reduced to binary alternatives or permanent status, but is diverse and fluid. Then on the other hand the compassion and sensitivity hits a roadblock because of a reading of the creation stories, especially of the creation of male and female (Gen 1:27), as infallible statements of fact which are treated as necessarily excluding such complexity. No wonder queer people see the gospel as bad news. Yet from Jesus and Paul onwards the Christian movement was characterised by the opposite tendency: to take human situations seriously and give them weight even to the extent of setting biblical commandments aside in favour the greater biblical command of love. People advocating this restrictive stance can end up having more in common with the forces that resisted Jesus and Paul than with Jesus and Paul themselves.

The problem is not that people take Gen 1:27 about God making male and female too seriously, but they do not take it seriously enough and see it for what it is in its historical and cultural context. It is true that for centuries the creation stories were read as statement of fact – including according to its narrative context that creation took place ca 6000 years ago over a period of 6 days, that humans were made from nothing or according to the second story from dust, that woman were made from a man's rib, that weeds and woes and painful birth contractions only came into being then because of an act of disobedience about eating a forbidden fruit. It is also true that our listening to these texts has changed, so that we no longer treat such detail as fact, but allow ourselves to be informed by more recent knowledge. That knowledge includes quite different understandings of creations' age, the evolution of species and geology, but also much more informed understandings of the nature of such creation stories in ancient cultures, including the creative adaptation of such myths in Israel's tradition, which embody profound insights despite their mythological

content. To listen and respect such texts does not require that we always agree with them. Good listening is not about agreeing but about hearing what the other is saying and respecting that at points we will agree or not agree and not trying to pretend otherwise. We need to respect what these texts are and neither read into them our modern scientific understandings nor for dogmatic reasons assert that they are inerrant or adequate accounts of reality. Mostly we have no hesitation in recognising the distance between our understandings and theirs about creation's age and evolution. Therefore to exempt the creation stories' explanations of the origin of sexuality and gender from such listening but apply it only to the other details appears arbitrary and unwarranted. As new information enables us to see that creation is much older and complex, so it enables us to see that reducing humankind to simply male and female in an exclusive sense and denying the fact that the matter is much more complex and includes variation and fluidity, at least around the edges, or suggesting this all changed with the first human sin, is inadequate. It is certainly not a sound basis for ethical judgements about what is legitimate or illegitimate in sexual expression. Love and information ought not therefore to allow texts like Gen 1:27 to function as roadblocks to love and flexibility in the way that does for those espousing Option 2. Such texts need to be taken seriously as belonging to ancient creation stories and weighed and assessed in the same way as all other elements of such stories.

In defence of Option Two, however, it takes seriously the biblical prohibition and even if in a modified way can be seen as coherent with at least one aspect of the biblical exposition found in Romans, namely forbidden acts, and thus makes sense for those for whom biblical authority is an essential presupposition for their faith. While the arguments above that it is unfair might appear to have weight, from this presuppositional base it is also unfair and unjust to encourage people to engage in a lifestyle which God has forbidden. Compassion, from this point of view, is not taking what some argue is the easy route of simply conforming to current trends, but engaging with such people with the acknowledgement that in many cases their state is no fault of their own and can be seen as part of the imperfection which resulted from the fall, when, as scripture teaches and basic visual checking confirms, people were made to be male and female and to copulate as nature indicates.

3. Not to embrace Paul's view of sexual orientation, acknowledging that there are some genuinely same-sex oriented people (as Option 2) and encourage them to express their sexuality responsibly on the same basis as heterosexual people

Then they should be treated in the same way as heterosexual people with regard to marriage and leadership in the church in accordance with the biblical values of justice, compassion and non-discrimination. This is by no means a novel approach, but one which people have taken with regard to a number of issues where it has become clear that what biblical writers assumed was either incorrect or needed substantial revision – such as with regard to cosmogony, cosmology, medicine, demonology imminent eschatology,

reproduction, marriage, slaves, women, divorce and much else. It also lies at the heart of what constitutes the Christian movement in the first place and was a major factor in its emergence in dispute with the rest of Judaism such as in its setting aside of the biblical requirement of circumcision, which created intense divisions within the Christian movement. Such developments found their precedent in Jesus himself who allowed the biblical command to respond in compassion to those in need to override other demands like sabbath observance. If there really are people who are genuinely and not pathologically same-sex in their orientation – which now many government legislations acknowledge – then embracing option 3 is an ethically sustainable way to proceed and avoids the injustice entailed in declaring same-sex desire as acceptable but then blocking its expression.

The counter to this position is that it sets aside what is clearly forbidden both by scriptural command and through biblical exposition, creating a different basis for ethics, an approach unacceptable for those for whom biblical authority is foundational to their faith.

Reflection

I am convinced that for many with same sex orientation we are not dealing with the perversion which Paul assumes but with what comes close to being their natural state. For them, rather than unbiblically accepting their orientation and then cruelly imposing the biblical prohibition on their expressing their sexuality, I would urge that they treat themselves as seriously and respectfully as should all, whatever their orientation, so that their sexuality is healthily integrated and expressed in loving and caring relationships. Obliging them to celibacy is unfair, unhealthy and unwise.

And what about gay marriage? If we believe that marriage, as the appropriate context for sexual intercourse, must always leave open the possibility of conception and creating offspring, and so reject contraception, then the inseparability of sexual intercourse for procreation and sexual intercourse as an expression of intimacy and love necessarily excludes extension of marriage to include same-sex couples. If we accept contraception, and so accept that marriage need not necessarily be for procreation, but may be for companionship, and sexual intercourse within it as an expression of intimate love, as are many heterosexual marriages, then there would seem to me to be no barrier to extending marriage to include same-sex partnerships.

It is a separate question whether same-sex couples should be able to adopt and bring up children, but that has long since been accepted in legislation. It is also a separate, but important, issue how well children are parented, including the balance of their experiences of male and female role models. This should not be confused with the issue of equality of marriage, unless we were to move in the direction of recognising only those partnerships as marriage which are committed to producing and parenting children, marriage as contract for parenthood, which would mean excluding from marriage both heterosexual and homosexual partnerships where that is not the intent. In the ancient world, indeed until the

mid-twentieth century, these options were not on the table as they are today as a result of the availability of effective contraception – an innovation, which has had an enormous impact on society, far beyond the marriage question. It has revolutionised how women have been able to contribute to society. It has radically changed pre-marital sexual relations. It is also time for us to recognise that it now makes recognition of committed long term same-sex relations as inevitable and right.

There is wise precedent for applying the biblical principle of love and care in relation to biblical commands and the assumptions of biblical writers which are no longer seen as valid, applicable or sufficiently comprehensive. Jesus prioritised love over other requirements, for instance, “The sabbath was made for people not people for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27) and met with stiff resistance from the pious who found this intolerable (Mark 2:1 – 3:6). In the early church in New Testament times there was intense struggle between those who argued for setting circumcision aside and those who insisted on upholding all biblical commands, including circumcision of Gentiles as enjoined in Genesis 17.

The Church in more recent centuries has had to adjust similarly to departing from some biblical prohibitions, not out of lack of faith, but in view of the biblical principle of love and the model of taking new situations and knowledge into account. The result has been changed approaches to slavery, women (their status and roles, including leadership in the church), and to provisions forbidding divorce, remarriage, and remaining married after adultery and much more.

Respecting biblical writers includes acknowledging distance as well as embracing proximity. This applies also to what is said about same-sex relations. There should be no discrimination against same-sex oriented people in any aspect of life and that includes in marriage and holding positions of responsible leadership. The same criteria should apply in every situation, whether a person is heterosexual or homosexual. This would seem to be, at the very least, natural justice, and a Christian response which embraces the biblical value of love should never lag behind that.

I am however also aware that some do not reach these conclusions, not out of ignorance or lack of care, but out of a deep sense of commitment to people and to the biblical heritage. There needs to be room for open discussion and mutual respect. While on the basis of my historical research and then contemporary reflection I see option Three as the way ahead, there have been others who on the basis of my historical research and their reflection have preferred Option Two or One.

Authors referred to

An extensive footnoted discussion is to be found in
Loader, William. *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012)
Loader, William. *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Judaism and Christianity*
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) (a summary of 5 volumes of research for a wider readership)

- Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980)
- Countryman, L. William. *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007)
- du Toit, Andrie B. "Paul, Homosexuality and Christian Ethics," in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honour of Peder Borgen* (ed. David E. Aune; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 92-107
- Gagnon, Robert A. J. "The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Key Issues," and "Response to Dan O. Via," in Dan O. Via, and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 40-92, 99-105 (cited as Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*)
- Gagnon, Robert A. J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001)
- Hanks, Thomas. "Romans," in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache; London: SCM, 2006) 582-605
- Jewett, Robert. *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress. 2007)
- Martin, Dale B. "Heterosexism and its Interpretation of Romans 1:18-32," in Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 51-64
- Martin, Dale B. "Paul Without Passion: on Paul's Rejection of Desire in Sex and Marriage," in Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 65-76
- Scroggs, R. *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983)
- Swancutt, Diana M. "'The Disease of Effemination': The Charge of Effeminacy and the Verdict of God (Romans 1:18-2:16)," in *New Testament Masculinities* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson; SemeiaSt 45; Atlanta: SBL, 2003) 193-234
- Swancutt, Diana M. "Sexy Stoics and the rereading of Romans 1.18–2.16," in *A Feminist Companion to Paul* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff; London: T&T Clark, 2004) 42-73
- Via, Dan O. "The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality," and "Response to Robert A. J. Gagnon," in Dan O. Via, and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 1-39, 93-98 (cited as Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible*).
- Wink, Walter. "Homosexuality and the Bible," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (ed. Walter Wink; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 33-49

Revised March 2014