

Among the most hotly debated questions in theology in at least the last 50 years is “What did Paul think about sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation?” Specifically in reference to what we now refer to as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer persons (LGBTQ+) to define the diversity of ways that human sexuality presents itself. At work in this topic are three separate contributors: Paul’s context and what he said in certain passages; translation of said passages; and application of those passages today. While it has been interpreted that Paul prohibits LGBTQ+ identity, expression, and relationships, it is my contention that Paul is not so much laying out a universal prohibition, but referencing specific acts and power dynamics in his time.

## Context

Homosexuality<sup>1</sup> in the Greco-Roman time period was not straightforward. The earliest evidence we have of it occurs on Greek vase paintings dated to around 500 BCE.<sup>2</sup> They show adult males engaged in oral and anal intercourse, which is not something known to be depicted on artwork involving pederasty.<sup>3</sup> Another painting of a similar time period depicts an orgy occurring around a wine bowl. In both cases it is believed to be a form of satire, exaggerating the complete loss of any sexual inhibition by men with other men.<sup>4</sup> This provides some evidence that although pederasty is predominantly the relationship depicted in Greek artwork, peer to peer homosexual relationships did exist.<sup>5</sup> Homosexual acts among women, while far less popular, were chronicled as well. The earliest evidence is from the seventh century BCE and depicts two women in what is clearly an embrace involving mutual sexual pleasure. Unlike with homosexual depictions of men, there appears to be no evidence of a pederastic aspect to female homosexuality.<sup>6</sup> While these depictions exist, it is not fair to

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will use the term *homosexuality*, understanding that in the Greco-Roman time period there was no concept of an orientation known as such. This is for simplicity’s sake. Additionally, when I use it in the context of today I do so acknowledging that it is not the only representation of human sexuality outside of heterosexuality.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas K. Hubbard, “Peer Homosexuality,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, 1st Edition (Chichester, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 148.

<sup>3</sup> sexual activity involving a man and a boy or youth.

<sup>4</sup> This will be relevant in the later discussion of Paul’s usage of homosexual acts in the vice list in Romans 1.

<sup>5</sup> Hubbard, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Hubbard, 144.

assume that they were accepted as good. Influential Romans such as Lucretius and Plato wrote about their objections to homosexual acts because it couldn't result in procreation.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is popular to pit Jewish ideas of sexuality against Greco-Roman practices, or attempting to *influence* the surrounding culture, it is best to think of it in terms of *interactions*.<sup>8</sup> The historian Diodorus Siculus recounts that in terms of marriages and funerals, Moses had established “customs far different from all other people. But under the empires which rose up in later ages, especially during the rule of the Persians, and in the time of the Macedonians, who overthrew the Persians, through intermingling with foreign nations, many of the traditional customs among the Jews were altered...This is what Hecataeus of Abdera has related about the Jews.”<sup>9</sup> An example of this is in Philo's *Hypothetica*, “If you indulge in illicit connexions, if you commit adultery, if you do violence to a child (for do not speak of doing so to a boy, but even to a female child); and in like manner, if you prostitute yourself, if you suffer any thing disgraceful contrary to what becomes your age, or appear to do so, or are about to do so, death is the penalty for such wickedness.”<sup>10</sup> In order to provide a distinction from already existing restrictions on certain sexual actions in contemporary Greco-Roman writings, Philo calls for the death penalty. It's less a new sexual ethic (*influence*), and more of an increase in consequence (*interaction*).

An additional consideration for Paul's context is the worship of other gods. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and into Paul's day one of the chief concerns of the Jewish people was the worship of other gods. One of the ways to prevent this from occurring was to only marry within ethnic boundaries. Marrying or taking women outside of the Jewish people was seen to have provided an opportunity for the worship of other gods and eventual drifting from YHWH in subsequent

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<sup>7</sup> Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Mary R. D'Angelo, “Sexuality in Jewish Writings from 200 BCE to 200 CE,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, 1st Edition (Chichester, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 544.

<sup>9</sup> Diodorus Siculus, “The Library of History,” 40.3.8, accessed June 10, 2023, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus\\_Siculus/home.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/home.html).

<sup>10</sup> Philo, “Hypothetica,” 7.1, accessed June 10, 2023, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak/courses/999/hypothet.htm>.

generations. In light of this concern, the two gods that were associated with sexuality in the Greco-Roman period were Aphrodite and Eros. Aphrodite was especially popular in terms of temples and the association of sexual pleasure to be an important part of satisfying her demands as a god. As a result of the Greco-Roman worship of Aphrodite there are moves in this time period to swing the pendulum further, from merely a prohibition on inter-marriage as an issue for proper worship, to also abstaining from sexual pleasure for its own sake. Philo states “that the Lord’s people should in particular restrain the overweening sexual appetite by making love for no reason other than to procreate within marriage.”<sup>11</sup> Early church fathers reinforce this view espoused by Philo. Kathy Gaca summarizes the words of Clement of Alexandria and its implications: “human eroticism ‘works death from within,’ as an aphrodisiac force, if Christians fail to be strictly reproductive in their marital sexual relations. Only strictly reproductive Christian marital sexual activity has received a special dispensation of grace from Christ so as not to be a death-bearing act of Aphrodite worship.”<sup>12</sup> Eros finds less influence on the context of the time than Aphrodite, mostly due to far less public proliferation in terms of temple imagery and due to his association with male-male pederasty. As a result there is not nearly as much evidence of a polemic against him in Jewish and Early Christian writings.

Summarizing the context in its totality we are left with several items for consideration. The Greco-Roman and Jewish views on sexuality had varied opinions, with both interacting with each other in order to provide distinction and apologetic for their respective views. The Jewish teachings raised the severity of consequence, and were almost entirely concerned with idolatry, both inside of familial relations and in relation to the gods of the time period. Their focus was on the sexual acts of heterosexual married persons, both in terms of their fidelity to one another, and the reasons for their

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<sup>11</sup> Kathy L. Gaca, “Early Christian Sexuality,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, 1st Edition (Chichester, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 564.

<sup>12</sup> Gaca, 566.

engaging in any sexual activity. From this framework we can now enter into the words of the Apostle Paul and attempt to identify his concerns as well.

## Translation

In our discussion of Paul's sexual ethics concerning homosexuality we will focus on two passages: Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Cor 6:9-10.<sup>13</sup> The Romans passage reads as follows:

For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. Their females exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the males, giving up natural intercourse with females, were consumed with their passionate desires for one another. Males committed shameless acts with males and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Rom 1:26-27 NRSVue)

Before diving into the specifics of these verses it is helpful to give a brief summary of the overall intent of the letter. "The intent of Romans is Christoformity in both Jewish and gentile believers," the Weak and the Strong respectively. The Weak are adamant in their belief that Torah observance is required, and the Strong are flippant in their encouragement of the Weak to eat and drink whatever they like, their dismissal of the Torah, and their higher social status.<sup>14</sup> Paul's main concern in the letter is how to mediate the disagreements between these two parties. As we drill further down into the surrounding verses of our passage Paul is setting up a Jewish caricature of gentile conduct. It's not meant to describe *all* humanity. This is evidenced by its similarities to the Wisdom of Solomon, itself a text providing a caricature of pagans. Even the list of "sins" is strikingly similar in both texts:

For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature,  
and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists,  
nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works;  
but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air  
or the circle of the stars or turbulent water  
or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world.  
(Wisdom of Solomon 13:1-2 NRSVue)

Then it was not enough for them to err about the knowledge of God,

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<sup>13</sup> I will only be examining these two passages under the majority scholarly opinion that these are texts penned by Paul himself. More could be said about the other Pauline passages and their reception, interpretation, and application throughout church history. For the sake of the length and limited scope of this paper I have chosen to exclude them.

<sup>14</sup> Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 179.

but though living in great strife due to ignorance,  
they call such great evils peace.  
For whether they kill children in their initiations or celebrate secret mysteries  
or hold frenzied revels with strange customs,  
they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure,  
but they either treacherously kill one another or grieve one another by adultery,  
and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption,  
faithlessness, tumult, perjury,  
confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors,  
defiling of souls, sexual perversion,  
disorder in marriages, adultery, and debauchery.  
(Wisdom of Solomon 14:22-26 NRSVue)

If it is a caricature, then what exactly is Paul pulling from and what is he saying?

“Dishonorable passions,” “consumed with their passionate desires,” “shameless,” all words that Paul uses to describe these gentile acts. The universal theme is people full of lust, aggressively acting out with one another to satiate their uncontrollable sexual desire. As we have already seen in the surrounding Greco-Roman context this would be referring to heterosexual men and women going above and beyond whatever heterosexual relationships they may have, to do more sexual activities with those of the same sex. This would likely be either as an act of worship to a god or as an extreme example of insatiable lust. What is not in view here is same-sex attraction, or what we would today refer to as homosexual. The underlying premise is that gentiles are sex crazed people and Paul is giving some examples of how that manifests.<sup>15</sup> The problem lies with the underlying reason for the acts (idolatry, lust, domination), not the acts themselves. If Paul had an issue with those acts specifically, even if done without being “consumed with passionate desires,” he doesn't say so here, and would likely be in line with the broader cultural context of his day.

The passage in 1 Cor reads as follows:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, men who engage in illicit sex, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

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<sup>15</sup> James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2013), 155-56.

In this passage Paul is a great deal more specific in that he is naming these acts as ones that would exclude someone from the kingdom of God. At the root of the debate on this passage is how two words are translated: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. It is helpful to see how they are translated in several different versions:

	<i>malakoi</i>	<i>arsenokoitai</i>
NRSVue	male prostitutes	men who engage in illicit sex
NIV	men who have sex with men	
KJV	effeminate	abusers of themselves with mankind
NASB	homosexuals	
NLT	male prostitutes	practice homosexuality
DBH <sup>16</sup>	feckless sensualists	men who couple with catamites

Like with most translations of an ancient text, results will vary. Based on the evidence of the time period largely referring to homosexual acts in pederastic terms, the translation choices of the NIV and NASB are the most problematic. The two terms refer to two different roles, and thus warrant separate translation. In the BDAG Greek Lexicon *malakoi* pertains to the passive person in same-sex intercourse, and *arsenokoitai* pertains to the dominant person in the same scenario. Given that the context largely concerned older men with younger boys, and the inherent lack of an idea such as “sexual orientation” in antiquity, then these two terms are best rendered separately.<sup>17</sup> The choice of “homosexuals” is especially egregious on the part of the NLT given what “homosexual” means in today’s language and usage.

In summary, the passages in which Paul references something akin to homosexual activity are on the one hand exaggerated polemics for a broader point within Romans, and on the other hand a specific penetrator/penetrated act in the context of adult men with male slaves in 1

<sup>16</sup> David Bentley Hart’s translation of the New Testament

<sup>17</sup> Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 274.

Corinthians, within a power dynamic that has no allowance for mutual consent. Now that we have an understanding of the context and translation we can turn to the application of these texts for us today.

## **Application**

If Paul's words in these two passages don't prohibit LGBTQ+ identity or activity, but instead focus on a prohibition of certain acts involving an unhealthy power dynamic, then what exactly should we think of Paul's sexual ethic today? Does it matter what a single and celibate man that thought the end of the age was imminent might have to say about sexual ethics today? The answer is complicated. On the one hand we could say that nothing Paul says matters in terms of those decisions, and that would be a viable option. We don't adhere to much of what he says in terms of church leadership, head coverings, and greetings. We don't always seek to emulate his decisions, like calling for his opponents to castrate themselves. But if we are to continue in the Christian faith then we hold the Scriptures as valuable and vital to our lives. Karen Keen offers a solution: discernment through a deliberative process concerning biblical mandates and creation ordinances. As examples she highlights that much of what we observe in both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament is a continual reevaluation of mandates and ordinances in light of human need and suffering. Jesus violates the Sabbath to care for others; the authors of Deuteronomy altered the slave laws from Exodus; divorce laws were altered by Jesus himself. The overarching theme is that contexts and circumstances change, and thus the mandates and ordinances can change too, but always with a discernment process aimed at human need and suffering.<sup>18</sup>

Further elaborating on Keen's proposal, David Gushee offers something he calls "covenant realism."<sup>19</sup> The Scriptural basis for covenants and how they function is well established within

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<sup>18</sup> Keen, *Scripture, Ethics*, 74–85.

<sup>19</sup> David P. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 243–47.

history and our current context. God made a covenant with his people and we make covenants in marriage. Gushee then proceeds under the assumption that monogamous relationships lie at the center of human flourishing, which is largely undisputed. A covenant can be entered into by anyone of any sexual or gender identity to show a commitment to love and stability within a community. This goes beyond the baseline of consent in sexual relationships, and elevates a Christian (and dare I say...Pauline) sexual ethic that has at its core those virtues in Scripture (fruits of the Spirit) that Karen Keen highlights in her book and that leads to flourishing in all relationships across the sexual spectrum. We must face the fact that roughly 3.8% of the population is LGBTQ+, and there is nothing that can be done to change that reality.<sup>20</sup> They should be permitted the ability to live their lives with those they love inside of the Christian faith and tradition.

Determining a sexual ethic in any period of human history is incredibly difficult. We have surveyed the landscape of Greco-Roman sexuality in the New Testament time period, as well as the writings of Paul in his undisputed letters. Society at the time assumed heterosexuality was the norm and all that existed. Sex acts outside of that were sometimes accepted, allowed, permitted, tolerated, or outright rejected. Paul and his contemporaries seemed to be concerned with procreative sexual activity devoid of pleasure and only inside ethnic boundaries (Philo) or Christoform boundaries (Paul). In light of what we now know in terms of sexual and gender identity there is a path forward for full LGBTQ+ inclusion with an emphasis on human need and suffering, elevating covenant agreements between individuals.

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<sup>20</sup> “How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?,” Williams Institute, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/how-many-people-lgbt/>.



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