

6 Romans. Good News for Sexual Minorities:

Deconstructing Anti-Semitism and Homophobia

Introduction The Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans (some five house-churches in Rome) is without doubt:

(1) the biblical book with the greatest impact in world history, instrumental in the conversions of St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Wesley, and in the early twentieth century detonating the explosion of Karl Barth's theology that signaled the collapse of nineteenth century optimistic liberalism;

(2) the focus of the most scholarly study, especially from the Reformation to the present;

(3) of greatest theological controversy in terms of its interpretation and its significance as a guide for life in the modern world.

In the last century, for instance:

(1) Romans 13:1-17 was the favorite text of Nazi theologians and religious leaders seeking to promote submission to authorities and collaboration with Hitler's extermination of Jews;

(2) Romans 1:26-27, as misinterpreted by Thomas Aquinas, provided the principle biblical justification for Nazi persecution of homosexuals (for their "unnatural acts")-- leading to their inclusion in the Holocaust violence;

(3) More recently, however, Romans 16 has played a key positive role in feminist and Latin American theologies, transforming the interpretation of Paul concerning both women and the poor.

Of the seven New Testament letters undoubtedly written by Paul himself, Romans is the last (58 AD). Dictated to Tertius in Corinth (Romans 16:22-23; 1 Corinthians 1:14) prior to the Apostle's trip to Jerusalem, imprisonment, and journey to Rome as Nero's prisoner, Romans represents the classic and mature expression of the apostle to whom we mainly owe the diffusion of the Christian faith to Gentiles and the Western world.

How the first house-churches in Rome were originally established we cannot be sure. Prisca/Priscilla possibly was the pioneer evangelist in Rome (ca. 48-49), since she is the first person mentioned as a leader, and one of the churches met in her house (Romans 16:3-5a; see Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the resurrection in all four Gospels). Both Paul and Peter arrived in Rome many years later, Paul as a prisoner ca. 59-61 AD and Peter ca. 63-65 AD.

Priscilla's preaching may have occasioned the uprisings among the Jews of Rome that caused Emperor Claudius' decree expelling the Jews from the city in 49 AD-- including Priscilla and Aquila. The couple then took up residence in Corinth and later moved to Ephesus, where they instructed Apollos (Acts 18:26). Following Claudius' death Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome (ca. 55-56 AD). When Paul greeted them (Romans 16:3-5b), they had resumed their work and ministry in the capital, and one of the five churches met in their house. During their absence from Rome, however, the membership of the churches had changed. When Claudius decreed the expulsion of the Jews from Rome--including the small Jewish sect of believers in Jesus as Messiah--Gentiles were a tiny minority in the churches. But after Claudius' death only a few Jews managed to return to the capital, and when Paul wrote Romans the great majority in the five house-churches were Gentiles.

Consequently, Romans mainly addresses these Gentiles. In Jerusalem Paul had defended the freedom of the Gentiles to join the churches without submitting to Moses' Law (--> Galatians). In Romans, however, confronting the contempt of "the strong" (mainly Gentiles), the Apostle finds it necessary to defend Israel's permanent place in God's project of universal liberation (Romans 9--11; 14). Paul's goal in Romans is a network of house-churches characterized by inclusivity and mutual acceptance (15:7-13) which could then serve as a base for his projected mission to Spain (15:14-33).

1. God's Wrath Against Those Who Oppress the Weak and the Poor (Romans 1:18-3:20). Is the Gospel that Paul proclaims (Romans 1:16-17) "good news to the poor and oppressed," as was Jesus' message? Or has it been transformed into "another gospel" (--> Galatians 1:6-9; 2:10) that supports the unjust and oppressive status quo of the Roman Empire (Rom. 13:1-7)? This is a question highly significant for us, as well as for the original readers. Of the 28 persons Paul greets in the five house-churches in Rome (Rom. 16:3-16), 12 had names that were common among the slaves (25-33% of the city's population were slaves). Many probably sold themselves into slavery due to debt problems, to which Paul may allude in Romans 13:7-8 ("owe no one anything," but cf. 1:14; 15:25-29). In Romans 12:8 Paul exhorts the house-churches to contribute generously to meet the needs of others (Gal. 6:10)--even hungry enemies are to be fed (12:20, citing Proverbs 25:21). Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) is called a prost-tis, most likely a "patron" who had generously contributed to Paul's ministry (cf. the possible references to civic benefactors in Rom. 13:3-4, 12:8). In Romans we also find Paul's final reference to his great project of an offering for the poor saints of Jerusalem, which he now prepares to deliver (Rom. 15:25-28; cf. Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; -->2 Cor. 8--9; cf. Acts 24:17). Elsa Tamez¹ has shown that Paul's teaching concerning God's free grace and justification by faith was of special

significance for the poor, oppressed and marginalized (Rom. 1--4; Galatians), as was also his concern for those weak in the faith (Rom. 14).

Even more evident than his concern for the poor, however, is Paul's explicit emphasis in Romans on oppression as the dominant characteristic of human life under the Empire:

- he begins his proclamation in prophetic tones declaring God's wrath revealed against all impiety/idolatry and oppression ('adiklā) (twice in Rom. 1:18, // liberation/salvation, 1:16); see similarly Yahweh's wrath against those who oppress the poor (Exodus 22:21-24);

- in Rom. 1:29 "oppression/injustice" ('adiklā) heads the vice list (contrasted with God's just ordinances), and brings death (1:32);

- in 2:8 and 3:5, oppression again is said to provoke divine wrath;

- in 6:13 Christians are to stop collaborating with the oppressive world system and present their bodies to God as instruments of divine liberating justice;

- in Rom. 9:13 in a context referring to the Exodus, Paul energetically renounces the notion (rhetorical question) that God should be an oppressor (cf. 3:5b).

In addition to these eight references to oppression/injustice ('adiklā) in Romans, Paul also employs the other common New Testament term for oppression/affliction (thlipsis) five times:

- "we boast in our oppressions" (5:3, twice);

- oppression, paralleling persecution and followed by three expressions for poverty, (scarcity, famine, nakedness)--none of which can separate us from God's love (8:35);

- oppression produces endurance (12:12) and is related to "solidarity" with the needs of the saints in time of persecution (12:13-14).

Thus, while Paul in Romans does not set out to analyze poverty nor to demonstrate that oppression is its most common cause, the Apostle's linguistic habits and associations (oppression, poverty and divine wrath against oppressors) clearly reflect the Exodus paradigm (23:21-24) so fundamental to Israel's historical consciousness and relived by the oppressed in every epoch.

2. God's Liberating Justice for the Weak and Oppressed (Romans 3:21--11:33).

Starting thus, with the experience of the oppressed and poor--and not with elitist Greco-Roman concepts and linguistic usage--enables us to understand Paul's enormous emphasis in Romans on God's justice as liberating justice. According to Paul's understanding of Jesus' Good News, therein is God's liberating justice--especially for the weak, oppressed and poor--revealed (Rom. 1:17-18; cf. the oppressed weak, 5:3, 6). In Paul's dazzling rhetoric in Romans, favorite terms (law, justice) are tossed about, co-opted from the opposition, cunningly returned, and then snatched back "for keeps" (--> Galatians)--a kind of "Star-Wars" performance that has kept theologians battling and commentators working overtime, virtually since Tertius in Corinth plopped down his pen in exhaustion (--> bibliography below).

2.1 Romans 3:21-26. In this nuclear center of Paul's Gospel dynamite, Jesus--faithful unto death--is the new Moses who accomplishes "redemption" (slave-market metaphor) by his sacrifice ("atoning death...blood," temple metaphors), resulting in liberating justice/vindication (courtroom metaphor). Continuity with the classic Exodus paradigm is clear (a redemption attested by the Law and the Prophets, and a Passing Over), but the traditional "we-they" dichotomy between Israel and Gentiles, oppressed and oppressors has vanished: since "all have sinned," Christ died for idolatrous enemy-oppressors as well as ordinary weak sinners (5:6-8).

2.2 Romans 3:27--4:25. Participation in God's new just world order (4:13) begins when anyone forsakes habitual oppressive ways and takes the stance of the beggarly poor, extending the empty hands of faith. Our common translations here easily give the impression of a "sloppy accountant" God (ever "reckoning" things that aren't so)--or worse a bribed judge who punishes the innocent and rewards a violent oppressor. For Paul, however, the creator God who--with performative language--"gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that are not so that they come to exist" (4:17) rehabilitates those who begin to "walk in the footsteps of the faith" of father Abraham (4:11).

2.3 Romans 5-8. Four fundamental facets of Christian liberation and freedom:

- This divine liberation accomplished by Jesus is above all liberation from the wrath that God historically manifests against oppressors of the weak and poor (Romans 5:9; 1 Thess. 5:9).

- Then, just as Exodus made clear that Israelite slaves also were prone to oppression and violence (2:13-14), so Paul in Romans 6 emphasizes how Jesus' followers need to be liberated from their own oppressive and violent tendencies ("justified/liberated from sin," 6:7; "instruments of liberating justice," 6:13).

- In Romans 7 Paul does not "demonize" or relativize the law to the extent we may observe in ---> Galatians, but--though "holy and just and good," (7:12)--the law still may be co-opted by the flesh for enslaving people. Therefore, as in ---> Galatians, believers also must be liberated by Christ from the law (7:24-25; cf. 10:4, "Christ is the end of the law").

- In Romans 8 Paul develops his vision of God's purpose as cosmic liberation from death and all the oppressive forces that impoverish (8:21-23, 33-39). He thus stands in the Exodus tradition, which culminates in Jesus' Good News to the poor: Paul expounds his

Gospel as focusing on God's liberating justice accomplished decisively by Jesus' death and resurrection.

2.4 Romans 9-11 (no longer viewed as a parenthesis on the predestination of Presbyterians). Clearly Paul's concern here is with God's project of liberating justice in human history and how the dialectics--between the roles of Israel and the Gentiles, unbelief and faith, human freedom and the sovereignty of divine grace--all are to be affirmed. Paul refers again here to divine wrath (9:22) and frequently of salvation/liberation (9:27; 10:1, 9-10, 13; 11:11, 14, 26) and in the end makes clear that he speaks of an integral salvation that culminates in the arrival of God's promised Liberator from Zion (11:26, citing texts from Isaiah). After referring to liberation from divine wrath, Paul speaks of Israel as racing madly to establish their own "justice" (a self-righteousness that merits divine recognition, 9:31; cf. 10:3, 5), but they stumble over a crucified messiah (9:32-33) and thus fail to reach Christ, who represents the goal post of the law (10:4). Believing Gentiles, meanwhile, wandering aimlessly, find themselves overtaken and caught up in the powerful embrace of God's justification by grace (9:30). Such justification by faith manifests God's liberating justice (10:10 // liberation/salvation, 10:9-10, 13).

3. Romans 12--15:14. Appropriate Praxis in the Communities of the Liberator.

Having established that all humanity lies prostrate under the power of sin (characterized by oppression and violence that provoke God's just indignation, 1:18--3:20), Paul concludes his letter with exhortations regarding appropriate "praxis" (12:4), insisting first of all that the house-churches not to be squeezed into the mold of the oppressive and violent Roman society surrounding them (12:1-2). In contrast to his previous polemical discourse, Paul's pastoral exhortations here avoid heavy use of conflictive justice terminology, preferring other terms (grace, mercy, the good, solidarity with the weak, and a love that fulfills the just

requirements of the law (13:8-10; cf. 8:4; 3:31). Nevertheless, he does refer to God's wrath manifest in vengeance (punitive justice "repaying" enemies/oppressors, 12:19-20; cf. the wrath and vengeance of rulers, 13:4-5). Finally, in one of his rare references to God's "kingdom/rule," Paul describes it as signifying "liberating justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (14:17; cf. Isaiah 32:15-18)--in a context that radically emends Torah's cultic provisions and declares "all things [not just foods]" clean (14:14, 20; --> Mark 7:19; --> Titus 1:15).

4. Anti-Semitism and "the Weak". Traditionally, the "weak" in Romans 14:1 -- 15:13 has been assumed to refer to Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah but continued to live under the yoke of the law (together with any Gentiles who shared this lifestyle). Mark Nanon, however, assuming a still close relationship between house-churches and synagogues, proposes that the "weak" in Romans are non-Christian Jews associated with the churches.²

Nanon also proposes that in Romans 13:1-7 the "authorities" are synagogue authorities, not those of the Roman Empire (see "Moses' seat" in Matthew 23:1-3).³ The more common current interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 is based on studies of tax revolts in Rome in 55-58 AD. Public protests against abuses by authorities who collected the taxes culminated in 58, the very year Paul wrote Romans. In that very specific historical context Paul clearly exhorted Christians to pay both "tax" and "tribute" to avoid the strong penalties for tax evasion (13:6-7).⁴

Scholarly consensus regarding Nanon's new alternative interpretations has not yet been achieved. His interpretations, nevertheless, bolster the conclusion that Paul's argument in Romans only reaches its goal with the exhortation for mutual and inclusive acceptance in 15:7-13.⁵ Furthermore, whether the "weak" be Jews who believed in Jesus or

non-Christian Jews, Paul insists that the Gospel is first for the Jews (1:16), a weak minority in the pagan Roman Empire (some 10%).

Although Romans does not refer explicitly to physical weaknesses, illness or handicaps, such sufferings are included implicitly in Paul's list of oppressions and afflictions that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (8:35-39). In addition, in 2:19 we have the metaphor where Paul refers to the pride of certain other Jews who offered to serve as "guides for the blind" (Gentiles).

On the question of anti-Judaism in the New Testament, in Paul's letters Romans 9--11 ("all Israel will be saved," 11:25-26!) is commonly recognized as unique in holding forth a radically optimistic hope for Jews (cf. 1 Thess. 2:14-16!).⁶ The letter shares with Galatians the emphasis on Christians as "free from the law" and still insists that Christ represents the "goal of the law and end of its authority" (10:4). However, Romans also insists on certain abiding norms for the churches: God's liberating justice--paradigmatically exemplified in the Exodus and inculcated as praxis in the Pentateuchal laws--as well as love for neighbor and enemy/ oppressor, (8:1-4; 13:8-10; 12:14-21; see 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

5. Women Apostles? In Romans 16:1-16, where Paul names 29 persons (greeting 28 of them), 10 of the persons named are women. Nine women are greeted (+ Phoebe named, 16:1-2), while 19 men are greeted. Among those greeted we find Junia and her husband Andronicus, both called "apostles" (16:7)--strongly confirming the leadership of women in the early churches. In the later Greek manuscripts scribes changed Junia's name to the masculine form ("Junias"). If Junia had been male, co-apostle with Andronicus, we would have one more example of same-sex apostolic pairs (like the six pairs among Jesus' chosen twelve; Matthew 10:1-4, Greek).

In Romans 16 Paul greets Prisca and Aquila (vv. 3-5), his “co-workers,” naming Prisca/Priscilla first, as was his custom (except in 1 Cor. 16:19), and praising both of them for their “courage” (a “masculine” virtue commonly expressed in Greek by a verb “act manly, play the man,” 1 Cor. 16:13). Notably, of the ten women Paul names in Romans 16, he specifies that eight are his “co-workers” in the work of the churches, while only one of the single men is called a “co-worker” (16:9; also see Aquila and Andronicus with their wives). The church work thus was done mostly by women, partly perhaps because the men had to dedicate themselves to their secular work. Paul, nevertheless, expressed most affection for the men, since rather than call them his “co-workers” he called them “beloved” (vv. 5, 8, 9). Among the women only his “co-worker” Persis is also termed “beloved.”

In addition to the women who are leaders in the five house-churches in Rome, Paul commends Phoebe (16:1-2), to whom the Apostle had entrusted his letter from Corinth for the five house-churches of Rome. Paul refers to Phoebe as “minister, deacon” (Greek, di-konon, using the masculine form), although translations commonly obscure this fact with the rendering “servant” (NIV). The Apostle indicates Phoebe’s high economic status, describing her as a “benefactor” of many, including Paul himself. Probably Phoebe traveled to Rome for legal reasons (concerning an inheritance?), and Paul took advantage of her trip to send his Magna Charta to the capital. When we recall the enormous impact Romans has had throughout church history (in the conversions of Augustine, Luther, Wesley and on Karl Barth’s theology)--how unimaginably different this history would have been had Phoebe lost the letter!

Centuries later the church in Rome came to be characterized by an exclusively male hierarchy (pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops), enormous and luxurious buildings,

support for corrupt politicians and with its own oppressive political power and military forces. In stark contrast, the five house-churches Paul addressed in his letter consisted largely of slaves and other marginalized people, led mainly by women, with women doing most of the work, a community of equals with no hierarchy. Yet these weak little communities soon were recognized to be a subversive threat to the Empire. The same picture emerges also from the other six letters that come from Paul himself but is somewhat modified in the three deuterio-Pauline letters. The Pastoral Letters establish male elders, but with no hierarchy, and limit the authority and ministry of women. The Protestant Reformation took a few steps to return the church to its original norms. Luther rejected the supreme authority of the Pope; Calvin, in accord with the Pastoral Letters, eliminated hierarchy among male clergy (presbyters/ elders). However, women's equality and leadership are still in the process of being restored today.

With exception of the striking testimony in chapter 16, Romans has little to say concretely concerning women. Perhaps of most theological significance is the absence of Eve when Paul deals with Adam's "fall," and compares Adam and Christ. Much later, 1 Timothy blamed the first sin on Eve as being "deceived" (1 Tim. 2:14), in a context that sought to restrict women's leadership in the churches. In Romans, however, the responsibility for introducing sin into the world is solely that of the male Adam (Romans 5:12-21).

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul "utilizes the woman as a means of study" when he refers to a married woman to illustrate Christian freedom from the law. Here the married woman is described as "subject to/bound to" her husband during this life, but when he dies, "free" (so much for the glorious state of marriage in Paul's view!). Similarly, Christian men and women had been subject to the law, but now are "free" from the law (7:6). In 1 Corinthians

(7:2-4, 10-16) Paul describes marriage in more positive terms as a relationship characterized by mutuality (cf. the almost sacramental view of marriage in Ephesians 5, probably deuterio-Pauline).

In Romans 2:25-29 Paul specifies that the male circumcision prescribed by the law (Genesis 17; Leviticus 12:3) is not required for Christian Gentiles (cf. deuterio-Pauline Colossians 1:11-12, where baptism of both sexes takes the place of male circumcision as the initiation rite for entering the new Christian communities). In the law, Leviticus even spoke of trees with fruit considered as “uncircumcised” for three years, perhaps indicating circumcision as a rite to maximize fertility (Leviticus 19:23-25), but the New Testament abandons circumcision and the demand for procreation and maximum fertility, insisting rather on multiplication of disciples (John 15:1-17) and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

6. Sexual Minorities in Inclusive House-Churches.⁷ Of the ten women named in Romans 16:1-16, only three are married (Prisca, vv. 3-4; Junia, v. 7; also Julia, v. 15 [Greek, contrary to NIV and NRSV!]), while the other seven represent sexual minorities (Phoebe, vv. 1-2; Mary, v. 6; Tryphaena and Triphosa, probably sisters, v. 12a; Persis, v. 12b; Rufus’ mother, a widow or divorced, 13b; and Nereus’ sister, 15b).

Of the 19 men greeted (16:3-16), only three are married: Aquila, vv. 3-4; the co-apostle Andronicus, v. 7; and Julia’s husband, Philologus, v. 15a. However, Paul greets 16 unmarried men who represent sexual minorities (vv. 5, 8-11, 13-15). Furthermore, in the greetings he sends on behalf of his co-workers in Corinth (16:21-24), Paul names only single men, all eight living with the Apostle in Gaius’ house (nine unmarried men in all—a living arrangement considered “immoral” and not permitted in some parts of the world today!). Thus, of the 38 persons named in Romans 16, only six are married; the other 32

(including Paul) were following Jesus' example and remained free of marriage ties--some perhaps may even have abandoned their spouses (Luke 14:26; 18:29).

In addition, as noted above, seven of the ten women named represent sexual minorities. Other New Testament books present a similar picture (see especially our chapters on Philemon, Colossians, and 2 Timothy). Such data make clear what little place married couples (our modern nuclear "family") had in the earlier New Testament churches (cf. the later deuterio-Pauline and pastoral letters) and how great was the role of sexual minorities (single men and women, widows, separated and divorced persons, etc.) in these churches.

Nevertheless, Paul, living in Corinth in a house with eight other unmarried males and writing to Roman house-churches where the vast majority of the membership represented sexual minorities, in Romans 1:26-27 is supposed to have bequeathed to the church the only text in the New Testament that explicitly condemns homosexuals--declaring them objects of God's wrath! In fact, according to traditional interpretation, Romans 1:26-27 constitutes the great pretext for persecuting and even killing homosexual persons, especially from the thirteenth to twentieth centuries. In part this has been due to the enormous influence of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and his Aristotelian theology of "nature."

The influence of Aquinas' interpretation, followed by Luther and other Reformers, reached its culmination with the Nazi Holocaust, where some 10-15 thousand homosexuals were killed, along with the six million Jews and other minority groups. The Nazis actually began their persecution and violence against homosexuals immediately after assuming power in 1933, five years before the Kristalnacht attack against the Jews in 1938.⁸ At a time when the world is beginning to recognize and respect the full human dignity of sexual

minorities (South Africa even prohibits discrimination against them in its new constitution), we must ask whether support for such a terrible history of violence can really be found in Romans.

Although totally ignored by traditional apologists determined to refute details of his biblical exegesis, the main point of John Boswell's classic study was to show how the bitter fruits of anti-Semitism and homophobia blossomed together in the late medieval church, probably for similar causes.⁹ Proper understanding of Paul's actual teaching in Romans may enable us to counteract both tragic expressions of prejudice and bigotry. Sadly, most post-Holocaust evangelical biblical scholarship has shown itself desperate to rescue Paul from any taint of anti-Semitism, while flaunting a "zeal without knowledge" (Romans 10:2) to convict Paul of homophobia! Evidently missing the main point of Boswell's work and not knowing that the Nazi violence, culminating in the Holocaust, began by targeting homosexuals, evangelical leaders commonly have sadly failed to distinguish between following Jesus and following Hitler.

For details and documentation on the complex and hotly debated subject of proper interpretation of Romans 1:26-27, the inquisitive reader must be referred to the bibliography. Here we will only briefly outline the most probable interpretation, which stands in stark contrast with traditional prejudices and common popular religious-political propaganda.

(1) In Romans 1:26 Paul speaks of Gentile women who sexually offer themselves to men for anal sex, to avoid procreation:¹⁰ "Therefore God gave them up to dishonorable desires, for even their females changed natural relations for unnatural ones." This text does not speak of "changing" male sexual companions for female (cf. 1:27), but only of acts that are termed "unnatural," that is, according to the sexual ideology of the day, acts that avoid

procreation. This is the only interpretation attested in the church fathers for the first 400 years! Clement of Alexandria (ca. 250 AD), the church's first significant theologian of sexuality, followed his citation of Romans 1:26-27 with the comment that "Nature has not even permitted the most unclean animals to procreate by means of the passage of evacuation!" (Paidagogûs, II, 87.1). And even St. Augustine, about a century later, clearly taught that Romans 1:26 speaks of women in relations "against nature," but in anal sex with men to avoid procreation. Not until John Chrysostom (ca. 400 AD) does anyone (mis)interpret Romans 1:26 as referring to relations between two women ("lesbians")! Consequently, we must conclude that the New Testament, like the Hebrew Bible and the Koran, contains no mention nor prohibition of relations between women ("lesbians").¹¹ Furthermore, although traditional apologists tend to forget that women exist, since "homosexuals" obviously include lesbians, Romans 1:26 (properly interpreted) by itself makes clear that the New Testament nowhere condemns "homosexuals." In the other four relevant New Testament texts, only males are described, and the condemnations have in view specific male sexual acts that are abusive, not persons with a certain sexual orientation.

(2) Recent studies point out that in Romans 1 Paul appears to manifest a considerable indebtedness to Leviticus 18 and 20.¹² However, as Saul Olyan demonstrated,¹³ the only sexual act prohibited in the Leviticus texts is male-male anal relations, not other homoerotic expressions--and that in an epoch prior to prophylactics. If we wish to express Leviticus' teaching in modern terms, therefore, we should not say that it condemns "homosexuality" (nothing here about lesbians nor the sexual orientation of persons involved), but that Leviticus teaches safer sex (avoid male-male anal intercourse without condoms), which is wise counsel in any century. Daniel Boyarin has shown that

Jewish rabbis in the early centuries AD properly understood that Leviticus prohibited only male-male anal sex.¹⁴ Bernadette Brooten points out that Leviticus 20:13 prescribes the death penalty for both males involved in anal sex, since both thus become contaminated and are unclean--even though one of the two might have been raped or be an abused minor.¹⁵ Leviticus here, however, does not refer to women. Neither does Leviticus condemn other (non-anal) homoerotic expression. Nothing is said here against oral sex, mutual masturbation, etc. Much less does Leviticus speak of a group of persons with a definite homosexual orientation, but refers only to acts, not the modern scientific concept of sexual orientation.

Paul, having spoken of females who offer themselves to males for anal sex (1:26) turns to males in Romans 1:27, and following Leviticus, refers to males who have “left” the use of females in order to engage in anal sex (without prophylactics) with other males. Hence, in Romans 1:26-27 Paul simply extends Leviticus’ prohibition of unprotected anal sex to include females with males, while repeating Leviticus’ prohibition of male-male anal sex. Hence, in Paul’s case also, we have no condemnation of “homosexuality” (nothing about lesbians nor the sexual orientation of the males involved): like Leviticus, but extending the prohibition of anal sex to include females with males, Paul teaches safer sex. Before condoms became widely available, anal sex was highly dangerous to health, facilitating the transmission of many diseases (before AIDS).

In addition, as Paul develops his argument throughout his letter, we may observe how he impressively “deconstructs” the three key elements in his rhetoric against anal sex and other practices referred to in Romans 1:24-27 as “unclean” (1:24, mistranslated by the NIV as “sinful”).

First, although Romans 1 does not say that anal relations are “sinful” but only that they are “unclean” (1:24), Paul later insists that ‘everything’ is clean (14:14, 20, not only “food,” as in many modern translations).

Second, Romans 1:26 refers to anal sex as “against nature” (with apparently negative overtones); however, in Romans 11:24 Paul celebrates the fact that God, the great Creator of miracles, acts “against nature” by grafting believing Gentiles into the Olive Tree (which represents Israel, the people of God; “against nature, unnatural,” Greek: para phusin, is precisely the same phrase as in 1:26, and occurs only in these two texts in the entire Bible).

(3) Romans says that the unclean anal sex referred to results in “shame” (1:26-27). However, Paul declares himself “not ashamed” (1:16) of his Gospel in which Jesus’ crucifixion--the most shameful experience in antiquity--is the central element (Rom. 3:21-26)! The Apostle even encourages the churches in Rome to learn to “boast” of culturally shameful experiences (Rom. 5:2-3, 11).

Some scholars have concluded that Paul’s rhetorical strategy of deconstruction apparent in Romans is quite intentional.¹⁶ However, as Gerd Theissen shows, as far back as 1955 German biblical and psychological studies recognized in Paul a person of homosexual orientation (albeit latent and repressed)--literature and insights still universally ignored in homophobic Anglo-American biblical studies.¹⁷ In the light of Theissen’s insights, it may be preferable to suppose that the deconstruction of his own rhetoric that Paul carries out in this letter is largely unconscious, surging forth from within, by the Spirit’s inspiration, as he expounds his liberating Gospel (cf. John 7:38). This would make Romans, somewhat like Augustine’s Confessions, a kind of latent “coming out” (to himself) manifesto. But whether intentional or unconscious, by the end of his letter (15:7-13) Paul’s call for an

inclusive, tolerant community of mutual acceptance is unmistakable.¹⁸ He then proceeds to show us how the five house-churches in Rome--with their sexual minority majorities--already exist as paradigms of his ideal (16:1-16).

However we interpret Romans 1:26-27, any attempt to deduce modern sexual norms must take into account that Paul devotes half a chapter to insisting on the necessity of some kind of head coverings for women who pray or prophesy in the worship service (1 Cor. 11:2-16; see chapter on 1 Corinthians). Modern readers may find significant divine wisdom through informed, culturally sensitive study of such texts.

Especially the great majority of heterosexual men in modern churches may find the prohibitions against unprotected male-male anal sex in Leviticus 18 and 20 and Romans 1:27 perfectly acceptable as a norm without exceptions to guide their own behavior. Similarly, women of whatever sexual orientation should have no problem with Paul's rejection of unprotected anal sex with males in Romans 1:26. However, for more than a century we have realized that a minority of persons are homosexual or bisexual by orientation, and the ready availability of condoms and teaching of safer sex already has significantly altered the risks involved if male homosexuals decide to engage in anal sex. Moreover, with our modern scientific understanding of the transmission of diseases, we now realize that two homosexual men in an exclusive relationship may practice anal sex without any risk--and the situation is similar even if the relationship is not exclusive, if safer sex guidelines are followed carefully. If such persons prefer non-anal sexual relations, Leviticus and Romans 1:27 have nothing directly to say to them.

However, if we would have biblical norms to guide everyone's sexual behavior today, they must be constructed mainly from more fundamental biblical texts that speak of freedom and voluntary acts (with neither coercion nor rape), of justice, of love, of wisdom,

and--in relationships established by promises or vows--of faithfulness. Such a creative, constructive (non-literalistic/legalistic) approach will enable us to stop torturing the biblical texts and using them to fortify and recharge our tendencies toward hate, fear, discrimination, oppression and violence. Instead, from Paul's letter to the Romans, we may learn to respect the limitation of biblical texts in their original cultural and historical context. Interpreted in this way, even today such texts, traditionally twisted and manipulated to promote violence, may teach us wisdom. Perhaps the wisest counsel that Paul gives us in these matters is in his Epistle to the Romans:

“...the one who loves another has fulfilled the law....Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:8-10, citing Leviticus 19:18).

Sexual practices which do no harm to one's neighbor are not condemned in the Bible, including Romans. To facilitate the reader's approach to this letter, so controversial in our day and so loaded with emotion and strong, cultural, traditional prejudices, we encourage that the entire book be read. And especially in the case of Romans, we recommend reading the book in reverse, beginning at the end, in order to arrive at the most controversial text only when we have observed the complete context (see outline).

During World War I, the homosexual military hero Lawrence of Arabia (Thomas E. Lawrence, 1888-1935) achieved his fame by a similar tactic. He observed that the cannons in the city of Aqaba were pointed toward the Red Sea and that the Turks could not alter the cannons' direction. Consequently, Lawrence decided to march with his Arab soldiers across the enormous “impassable” desert and attacked the Imperial Turkish forces from behind, thus gaining a legendary triumph.

Sexual minorities--misled victims of majority propaganda--have long been convinced that Romans 1:26 and 27 are two cannons pointed directly at them. After

carefully analyzing the context of the whole book and determining what the two verses say, we have seen that Paul does not aim any cannons at persons with a homosexual orientation. He speaks only of acts of anal sex (without a prophylactic), first of women with men (v. 26) and then between two men (v. 27). Furthermore, the three elements in the context that on first impression sound like derogatory rhetoric (uncleanness, against nature, causing shame) are each carefully deconstructed in the later chapters as the argument develops, and come to be viewed as highly positive.

Consequently, we conclude that Romans 1:26-27 offered wisdom for another epoch that did not understand sexual orientations nor the ways venereal diseases are transmitted and that did not have the option of utilizing prophylactics in the acts of anal sex. To point these two verses like cannons to condemn persons with a homosexual orientation today is to do violence to the Bible and promote violence against an oppressed minority that we should support with solidarity in their search for justice.

For an initial approach to the letter, contemporary readers may best grasp Paul's liberating message and avoid traditional misinterpretations, by following a different reading order.

Outline: the Romans Road in Reverse Gear (Reading Romans Backwards)

- 1 Historical context: sexual minority recipients and author 1:1-15; 15:14--16:27
 - Five sexual minority house-churches in Rome 1:1-7; 16:1-27
 - Crucial transition in Paul's ministry to the oppressed 1:8-15; 15:14-33

- 2 Paul's pastoral goal: viable, inclusive (tolerant) churches 15:7-13
 - Conflict resolution: the weak and the strong 14:1--15:6
 - The counter-cultural community: leaders and oppressors 12:1-21
 - Select, subversive submission to imperial authorities 13:1-14

- 3 God's project in human history: universal liberation 9:1--11:33
 - The final goal: covenant mercy for all 11:1-35
 - Intransigent obstacle: human unbelief 9:30--10:21
 - God's goodness, faithfulness, patience, liberating justice 9:1-29

- 4 Four fundamental dimensions of authentic Christian freedom 5:1--8:39
 - Liberation from death by the Spirit of life 8:1-39
 - Liberation from the law, guided by the Spirit 7:1-25
 - Liberation from sin, slaves of God's liberating justice 6:1-23
 - Liberation from divine wrath through Jesus' sacrifice 5:1-21

5	Amnesty for the marginalized: incorporation of the excluded	3:21--4:25
	Abraham, sexual minority, justified by his trust	4:1-25
	The redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ	3:21-31
6	All humanity under sin's tyrannical power	3:9-20
	All who condemn others: themselves subject to God's wrath	2:1-16
	God's people under God's wrath, in spite of their law	2:17-24
	In spite of their circumcision	2:25-29
	In spite of God's promises of blessing to them	3:1-8
	Gentiles under God's wrath,	1:18-32
	Because of their idolatry:	1:18-23
	Handed over to their sexual UNCLEANNESS	1:24-27
	Handed over to their SIN (oppression and violence)	1:28-32
7	Paul's powerful Good News for oppressed sexual minorities	1:16-17

Notes

1. Elsa Tamez, Contra Toda Condena: La justificaci n por la fe desde los excluidos (San Jos , Costa Rica: DEI/SEBILA, 1991); Justicia de Dios: Vida para Todos: La justificaci n por la fe en Pablo (San Jos , Costa Rica: SEBILA, 1991).

2. Mark D. Nanon, The Mystery of Romans: the Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 85-165.

3. Ibid., 289-336.

4. Charles D. Myers, “Romans, Epistle to the,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:816-830. For alternative New Testament perspectives on the state, see our chapters on 1 Peter (a human institution, not divinely instituted) and Revelation (“the great harlot” to be resisted by martyrs).

5. N. T. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991/92), 234-235.

6. Donald A. Hagner, “Paul’s Quarrel with Judaism,” in Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity, ed. Craig A. Evans & Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 128-150; cf. J. Lanier Burns, “The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11,” in Dispensationalism and the Church, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 188-229.

7. Thomas D. Hanks, “Paul’s Letter to the Romans as a Source of Affirmation for Queers and their Families” in Our Families, Our Values, ed. Robert Goss and Amy Strongheart (New York: Harrington, 1997). The statistics here are slightly inaccurate but do not affect the argument.

8. Günter Grau, ed., Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-45 (New York: Cassell, 1993/95).
9. John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980).
10. Thomas D. Hanks, “Bernadette J. Brooten on Natural Theology and Unnatural Acts in Romans 1” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Claremont, Calif., November 1997. copyright, Other Sheep, St. Louis, MO, 1997.
11. James E. Miller, “The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?,” in Novum Testamentum 35 (1995), 1-11; “Romans 1 Revisited,” article awaiting publication, 1999. Significantly for evangelicals, already in the 1960's the late Francis A. Schaeffer recognized that Romans 1:26 "does not speak of homosexuality"; see now his published lectures, The Finished Work of Christ: The Truth of Romans 1-8 (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 42-43.
12. Bernadette J. Brooten, Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).
13. Saul M. Olyan, “‘And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying down of a Woman’: On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13,” in Que(e)ring Religion: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 179-206.
14. Daniel Boyarin, “Are There Any Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality’?” in Journal of the History of Sexuality 5:3 (1995), 333-355.
15. Bernadette J. Brooten, Love Between Women
16. L. William Countryman, Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Daniel A.

Helminiak, What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality (San Francisco: Alamo Square, 1997).

17. Gerd Theissen, Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 26.

18. Robert Jewett, Christian Tolerance: Paul's Message to the Modern Church (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

Bibliography

Boswell, John. Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980.

----- Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe. New York: Villard, 1994.

Brooten, Bernadette J. Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism

Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996.

Castelli, Elizabeth A. "Romans." In Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, ed. Elisabeth

Schüssler Fiorenza, 2: 272-300. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Cranfield, C. E. B. The Epistle to the Romans. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.

Dunn, James D. G. Romans 1-8, 9-16. Word Bible Commentary 38A & 38B. Dallas: Word, 1988.

Elliott, Neil. "Asceticism among the 'Weak' and 'Strong' in Romans 14-15." Asceticism and the New

Testament. Leif E. Vaage & Vincent L. Wimbush. New York: Routledge, 1999, 231-251.

Faventa, Beverly Roberts. "Romans." In The Women's Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and

Sharon H. Ringe, 313-320. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. Romans. The Anchor Bible 33. New York: Doubleday, 1993.

Fredrickson, David E. "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of

Eros.” Homosexuality and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture. David L. Balch, ed., 197-222. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Hanks, Thomas D. “Paul’s Letter to the Romans as a Source of Affirmation for Queers and Their Families.”

In Our Families, Our Values, ed. Robert Goss and Amy Strongheart. New York: Harrington, 1997.

-----, “Bernadette J. Brooten on Natural Theology and Unnatural Acts in Romans 1.”

Paper presented at

annual meeting of Evangelical Theological Society, Claremont, Calif., Nov. 20-22, 1997. Copyright, Other Sheep, St. Louis, MO. (Also in More Light Update.)

Jewett, Robert. Christian Tolerance: Paul’s Message to the Modern Church. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982.

----.”The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans 1:24-27.”

Homosexuality, Science and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture. David L. Balch, ed., 223-241. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000

----. Romans. Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.

Moo, Douglas. The Epistle to the Romans NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Myers, Charles D. “Romans, Epistle to the.” In The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman,

5:816-830. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Nanon, Mark D. The Mystery of Romans: the Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter.

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.

Reid, Marty L. “Paul’s Rhetoric of Mutuality: A Rhetorical Reading of Romans.” In Seminar Papers,

Society of Biblical Literature. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995, 117-139.

Schreiner, Thomas R. Romans. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.

Stowers, S. K. A Re-Reading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles. New Haven: Yale, 1994.

Tamez, Elsa. Contra Toda Condena: La justificaci3n por la fe desde los excluidos. San Jos3, Costa Rica: DEI/SEBILA, 1991.

-----, Justicia de Dios: Vida para Todos: La justificaci3n por la fe en Pablo. San Jos3, Costa Rica:

SEBILA, 1991.

Williams, Craig A. Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity.

New York and Oxford: Oxford, 1999 (p. 365, note 28 on same-sex unions and Boswell).

Wright, N.T. The Climax of the Covenant. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991/92.

For updates on the Romans debates, see the papers presented each year at the Society for Biblical Literature (Atlanta: Scholars Press).