

Twelve Myths in the Homophobic Interpretations of Romans 1:24-27

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Romans 1:16-2:16 Translation

1:16-17 *Jesus' Good News for the oppressed* 16 For I am not ashamed of the Good News [to the oppressed], for it is God's power for integral liberation to everyone believing, both to the Jew first and to the Greek. For in it God's liberating justice is revealed from faith to faith, as it has been written: "Now the just man by faith will live" [Hab 2:4]

1:18-32 Rhetorical trap prepared: *Bad news for idolatrous oppressors* **18-23 *Idolatry*** 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all idolatry and oppression of *men*, who with their oppression even suppress the truth, 19 because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divinity, though invisible, have been understood and clearly perceived in the things that have been made, so they are without excuse, 21 because although they knew God, they did not glorify nor thank him, but became futile in their reasonings, and their undiscerning heart was darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools 23 and *changed* the glory of the immortal God into a likeness of an image of corruptible man and birds and quadrupeds and reptiles;

1:24-27 *Covetous desires and unclean sexual acts* 24 wherefore, God gave them up in the covetous desires of their hearts to uncleanness, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 who *exchanged* the truth about God for the lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed unto the ages! Amen. 26 For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions, for even *their* females *exchanged* the natural/procreative use (*chresis*) for the unnatural/nonprocreative (*para phusin*); 27 and similarly also the males, *leaving* the natural/procreative use (*chresis*) of females, were inflamed with their lust for one another, males in males working up their shameful member* and receiving back in their own persons the recompense due their error. *see Jewett 2006:179; alternatively: "committing shameful acts"

1:28-32 *Catalogue of 21 evils (vices and persons): Injustice, oppression, violence [nothing sexual]*

28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what is not proper, 29 having been *filled* with all

1-4 *oppression / injustice*, wickedness, covetousness, malice,

5-9 *full of envy*,

of murder,

of strife,

of guile,

of malignity,

10 gossipers,

11 [30] slanderers,

12 haters of God,

13 insolent/bullies,

14 arrogant,

15 boasters/braggarts,

16 inventors of evil projects,

17 disobeyors of parents,

18 [31] *undiscerning*, 19 *unfaithful*, 20 *unaffectionate*, 21 *unmerciful*;

32 who know God's just ordinance that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them

2:1-16 The Rhetorical Trap Sprung: *God's just judgment of hypocritical judges*

1 Wherefore, O man, you are inexcusable, everyone of you who judges; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, since you who judge practice the same things. 2 Now we know that God's judgment is according to truth against those who do such things. 3 So do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape God's judgment? 4 Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and longsuffering, not realizing that God's kindness should lead you to repentance? 5 But by your stubbornness and your impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's just judgment will be revealed.

6 He will repay according to each one's deeds: 7 on the one hand, to those who by manly perseverance in doing good work seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give life in the age to come; 8 on the other hand, to those who are self-seeking and disobeying the truth, but practicing oppression, there will be wrath and fury. 9 Affliction and poverty on every soul of man working evil, the Jew first and also the Greek; 10 but glory and honor and peace to everyone working good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality.

12 For as many as have sinned without Torah also will perish without Torah; and as many as have sinned in Torah will be judged by Torah; 13 for it is not the hearers of Torah who are just with God, but rather the doers of Torah will be justified [at the future final judgment]. 14 For whenever Gentiles who do not possess Torah by nature the things of the Torah do, these, though not having the Torah, are a law to themselves, 15 who show the work of the Torah to be written in their hearts, to which their own conscience bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the day when, according to my good news, God, through Messiah Jesus, will judge men's secret thoughts.

The Twelve Myths

1 ***"In Romans 1:24-27 Paul condemns all homosexuals."*** Paul makes no reference to the modern scientific concept of individual sexual *orientation*. What he condemns is the *greed* and the *lust* (excessive, irrational, selfish "passion") of the idolatrous Gentile world expressed in sexual *acts* of oppression and exploitation, acts that included: (1) lustful procreative sex between men and women (1:24); (2) women offering themselves to men for anal sex, thus avoiding procreation (1:26), and (3) acts of male-male anal sex commonly used to exploit youths, slaves and prostitutes (1:27; not exclusive categories, 1 Tim 1:10).

2 ***"In Romans 1:26 Paul condemns lesbians."*** In Rom 1:26 Paul does not speak of women who "abandoned" their husbands or "exchanged" their sexual *partners* (cf. the males in 1:27), but rather of females who exchanged their sexual *practices* (procreative) for something "unnatural"—offering themselves to men for anal sex, thus avoiding pregnancy. Until around 400 A.D. the church fathers—including the two greatest sexual theologians, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine—recognized that Rom 1:26 referred to women offering themselves for anal sex with their male partners. Thus, Clement (ca. 250 AD), the church's first significant theologian of sexuality, followed his citation of Romans 1:26-27 with this comment: "Nature has not even permitted the most unclean animals to procreate by means of *the passage of evacuation!*" (*Paidagogus*, II, 87.1). Clement thus reveals that he viewed *both* verses to refer to anal sex (women with men, 1:26; men with men, 1:27). Therefore, what links *both* verses (1:27, *homoios*, "similarly"), is not our modern *concept* of "homosexuality" but the ancient *practice* of anal sex. The ancient tendency was to compare similar sexual *practices* (anal sex, avoiding pregnancy: females with males in 1:26, males with males in 1:27). All the other biblical texts referring to same-sex practices (abusive) refer *explicitly only to males*: Gen 19 (Sodom); Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; Jude 7. Paul, who triumphantly proclaimed Christ as the "end" of the Law (Rom 10:4), would hardly have invented a new law, an ethnical absolute prohibition of lesbianism, to add to Moses's 613. Thus, neither the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament"), nor the New Testament, nor the Koran condemn sexual relations between women ("lesbianism"). Nor did the historic, orthodox "conservative" view misinterpret Romans 1:26 to refer to lesbians. The innovative "liberal" misinterpretation of Rom 1:26 as a condemnation of lesbians became a popular heresy in the Middle Ages and thereafter, but was first introduced only around 400 A.D. and popularized by John of Chrysostom.

3 ***“In Romans 1:24-27 Paul condemns all sexual acts of love between men.”*** In Rom 1:24-27 Paul never refers to love. The only sexual practices he describes are those of [1] impious idolaters (1:25, 18-23) [2] whose abuses of power (injustice/oppression, 1:18, 29) and [3] egotistical lust (1:24, 26-27) commonly were manifest in (a) the corruption of boys; (b) the exploitation of slaves and prostitutes; especially in (c) the promiscuity of pagan fertility cults—all harmful to the weaker “penetrated” partners.

4 ***“In Romans 1:24-27 Paul explicitly condemns homoerotic acts as sin.”*** In Romans 1:24-27 Paul never refers to “sin,” but speaks rather of passions and sexual acts which he describes as “*uncleaness*” (Rom 1:24), a category that describes “things which are outside of their proper place” (according to anthropological studies of the Bible). When coffee that is “clean” is spilled on a shirt, the shirt becomes “dirty.” Similarly, when semen or blood flows out of the body, people become “unclean/dirty/impure” and unable to participate in Temple worship until cleansed (by prescribed rituals). Much more so will semen deposited “outside of its proper place” during anal sex make a person unclean. Later in the letter, however, Paul carries out a type of “deconstruction” of the traditional concept of “uncleaness” when he insists that for Christians “nothing is unclean of itself” (Rom 14:40, 20; see also Titus 1:15 and Jesus in Mark 7:19).

5 ***“In Romans Paul shows that homosexuality is an abomination, the most serious sin.”*** Paul never speaks of “homosexuality” nor of “sin” in Rom 1:24-27. Rather, the sexual “uncleaness” that he describes is itself the divine *punishment* on idolatrous people whom God had abandoned. When Paul describes various sins in Rom 1:18-23 he emphasizes idolatry and injustice/oppression (1:18, 23; cp 25, 29), and concludes his vice list by referring to people “without mercy” (and 28-31; cf. Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46, where no one is excluded from His kingdom for sins committed, but rather for lack of mercy and brotherly love towards the poor, weak, and oppressed). In Rom 1:24-27, when Paul describes the sexual uncleaness of the idolaters, he indicates that their sexual acts were motivated by greed/lust (prohibited by the Tenth Commandment). The rhetorical trap Paul springs in Rom 2:1-16 makes clear that the arrogance and hypocrisy of those who think they can judge the Gentiles (mainly referred to in 1:18-32) are much worse than the sins spoken of in 1:18-23, 28-32.

6 ***“In Romans 1 Paul demonstrates how certain individuals, because of their idolatry, become homosexual.”*** In Romans 1:18-32 Paul never speaks of “homosexuals,” nor does he refer to individuals. Rather, he employs the common literary genre of a “decline of civilization” narrative to explain how *the entire human race*, at some unspecified time, (1) rejected the true God and opted for idolatry (1:18-23, 25, 28) and (2) suffered the divine punishment of being abandoned to injustice (1:18, 28-32) and sexual “uncleaness” (1:24-27). However, neither the Hebrew Bible nor secular history records such an event as this “fall” of the human race (all originally heterosexual monotheists, according to Paul’s version). Therefore scholars commonly conclude that in Romans 1:18-32 Paul is using the literary form of “myth” or “legend” to establish his theological argument, similar to Jesus’ use of parables. But even if relating an actual event, Paul speaks of a “prehistoric” experience of the entire race—he makes no reference to the psychological development of specific modern individuals.

7 ***“In Romans 1:26-27 Paul condemns all homoerotic acts as being ‘against nature.’”*** “Nature” is not a category of biblical theology (it does not occur in the Hebrew Bible nor in the Gospels), but is rather a Greek philosophical concept (especially Stoic) that Paul used in a variety of senses. Jesus and the Hebrew Bible, rather, always spoke of the “Creator” and “creation” (Genesis 1-2; Psalm 104, etc). In Romans 1:26 Paul describes anal sex between females and males (to avoid pregnancy) as “against nature.” Then in 1:27 he characterizes abusive anal sex between males (also non-procreative) as similarly “against nature.” However, just as the Jewish concept of “uncleaness” undergoes a kind of “deconstruction” in Romans, Paul also indicates that Jews are circumcised against “nature” (Rom 2:27) and that God Himself continually acts “against nature” (11:24, the conversion of the gentiles; cf. all the miracles of Jesus and the apostles). Moreover, scientists have repeatedly observed homoerotic acts in more than 450 species of animals, so among human beings what is “natural” for some is “against nature” for others (just as in the case of lefthandedness).

8 ***“In Romans 1:24-27 Paul condemns homoerotic acts as being ‘shameful.’”*** In Romans 1:24 and 26-27 Paul describes lustful non-procreative sexual acts as “dishonorable/shameful” within ancient patriarchal societies. However, the concepts of “shame” and dishonor, just like those of “uncleaness” and “against nature,” undergo deconstruction as the letter unfolds. Later the key paragraph of the letter (Romans 3:21-26) reveals how God’s liberating justice is displayed for the redemption of humanity by means of Jesus’ death,

whose crucifixion represents the most shameful possible experience of His times. Paul thus insists that of this gospel, of a crucified messiah, “I am not ashamed!” (Romans 1:16-17). He even affirms twice that no one who believes in this crucified messiah should be ashamed (Romans 9:33, 10:11) but rather “boast” (three times: 5:2-3, 11), even when suffering oppression and persecution that normally would shame its victims. That is to say, Paul teaches his readers to “discern” (12:1-2) when a deserved shame exists, among people who are guilty of lust and sexual exploitation of the weak, and when the believers of a crucified messiah should “despise” the undeserved shame which an oppressive society instills in the weak and oppressed (Hebrews 12:2).

9 “Paul presents the ‘changes’ in sexual behavior which he describes in Romans 1:26 and 27 as comparable to the act of exchanging the worship of the true God for idols (described in 1:23, 25) and hence equally sinful.” When Paul refers to the prehistoric (mythological/legendary?) “fall” of our ancestors into idolatry and sexual uncleanness, he says nothing about modern youths who recognize their homosexual orientation from adolescence onward without ever having had any sexual relations with women (cf. 1:27). If an “exchange” in and of itself were sinful, then an informed and coherent Paul should encourage such youths to be faithful to their same-sex partner. However, Paul repeats the vocabulary of “change/leaving” in the rhetoric of 1:23-27, not to establish ethical absolutes, but rather to trap the reader who boasts of his moral superiority and condemns others (2:1). In Paul’s rhetorical trap, the “change” vocabulary (1:23, 25, 26-27) is another element that undergoes deconstruction later in the letter, where Paul declares that “transformation” (radical change) is the essence of sanctification (12:1-2).. Thus the reader who leaps to the conclusion that 1:26-27 implies a universal absolute prohibition of all homoerotic activity only lands more quickly in the rhetorical trap Paul prepared for arrogant judges who condemn others (2:1-16). In fact, of course, Paul is the great Theologian of Change, who sought the continual transformation of the Christian mind and praxis (Romans 12:1-2) and hoped for a total renovation of the cosmos (Romans 8:18-25; see 2 Corinthians 5:17). The changes denounced in Romans 1:23-27, however, are changes that dishonor God (1:23, 25) and harm the neighbor. Therefore, to evaluate different changes requires discernment: a woman who *changes* husbands while the first one is still alive is “adulterous,” but if she remarries after the death of the first husband, she is not adulterous (7:1-6). But Paul says nothing about sexual acts “against nature” (non-procreative) in contexts of relationships of committed love. Perhaps such relations were unknown to Paul, but we cannot twist his words to condemn something he decided not to mention or that he didn’t even know existed. Thus when Paul denounces “changes” (Rom 1:23-27) this provides no basis for condemning a Christian homosexual man who, never having had sexual relations with a woman, forms a permanent and exclusive relationship with another man to live faithfully in love. In such cases the exchange that harms would be that proposed by the pseudo-scientific ministers of the “Ex-Gay” movement, who—in an era devastated by AIDS—seek to break such stable relationships in order to impose heterosexual “marriages”—cruel pseudo-scientific experiments that commonly end in divorce, depression, addictions and suicides.

10 “Although Romans 1:26-27 never explicitly calls homosexual acts sinful, we know that Paul considered them so because in Genesis 1-2 God created only two sexes, male and female, designed to complement each other not only in sexual relations but also in the interpersonal marriage relationship.” Aside from the anatomical fit for procreation (now usually thwarted “against nature” by birth control devices), gender “complementarity” is only the new politically correct fundamentalist jargon used to promote female inferiority and passive submission and thus “complement” suppressed male superiority. In fact, the concept of gender “complementarity” is a product of 18th -19th century romanticism but now often anachronistically read back into ancient biblical texts, where gender relations commonly were assumed to be hierarchical, not complementary.

11 “In Romans 1-2 Paul demonstrates why, among the Gentiles (idolators) homosexuality became common, but remained (virtually) unknown among the Jews and Christians.” Both ancient literature and modern scientific studies demonstrate that no correlation whatsoever exists between monotheistic faith (Jewish, Christian or Muslim) and heterosexual orientation, nor between an “idolatrous” religion (one with images of its God or gods) and a homosexual or bisexual orientation. Paul recognizes that the Jews and others who condemn the idolatrous pagans “practice the same things” (Rom 2:1). Thus the Benjamite males sought to rape the visiting Levite (Judges 19:12-22; see the men of Sodom, Gén 19). Paul confesses that in his own adolescent sexual awakening he experienced temptations of “every kind of covetous desire” (Rom 7:8; the same Greek word that describes sexual uncleanness in 1:24;). In fact, the main psychological study of Paul concludes that the Apostle himself was a person with a repressed homosexual orientation.

12 *“In Romans 1:18-32 Paul demonstrates a scientific understanding of homosexuality that surpasses that of modern unbelieving scientists (who support the ‘gay agenda’).”* The Apostle’s discourse within the rhetorical trap of Romans 1:18-32 never pretends to expound a scientific comprehension of human sexuality, but rather denounces the impiety and injustice/oppression of the idolators and the greed and sexual uncleanness which the human race has suffered since its origins. Just as Jesus’ parable referred to the “mustard seed” (without scientific precision about size) to illustrate the principles of His kingdom (Mat 13:31-32), Paul incorporates within his denunciation references to the sexual uncleanness of pagan idolators, ever characterized by lust and selfishness—at times expressing itself in anal sex between women and men (1:26) or between two males (1:27). However, Paul’s rhetoric assumes a type of “myth” (a prehistoric fall occurring in a race that was totally monotheistic and “heterosexual” in its practices) and shows no understanding of evolution or the methodology of modern scientific historians; nor does he demonstrate any understanding of the concept of sexual orientation, a scientific perception that developed only in the late 19th century. Such recent scientific discoveries help us understand that neither being lefthanded nor homosexual is a consequence of the idolatry or the religion of certain ancestors, but rather represents a common variation within 450 species of animals—and among human beings of every place, ideology and religion. Some recent studies cite the observations of certain ancient astrologers, who observed the diversity of constant human sexual preferences but superstitiously attributed them to the stars. However, if Paul was aware of any diversity of constant sexual preferences amongst his contemporaries, he makes no reference to them, describing instead some prehistoric experience involving the entire human race. And he certainly did not propose any astrological explanation.

Conclusions:

1 Paul emphasizes only *one* normative element: he condemns **covetous desire** (24a, 26a, 27b), the excess of passion (rational and unjust) that was prohibited in the Tenth Commandment and remains normative throughout the letter (13:8-10). The sexual acts in 1:24-27 are examples of the “excess” that harms the neighbor (13:8-14).

2 The other *four* elements (**uncleanness, shame, against nature, change**) do not represent permanent universal “ethical” norms and thus undergo a deconstruction later in the letter.

3 Paul makes clear in the later chapters that sexual acts should avoid “excess” passion, the covetous desire that results in harm to the neighbor (for example, adultery, the deprives the neighbor of his sexual property, 13:8-14). But nothing suggests that Paul intends to condemn every sexual act that is non-procreative (“**against nature**”) or characterized in the Law as “**unclean**,” or considered “**shameful**” by society, or that constitutes a “**change**” from previous sexual practices.

4 Nowhere on Paul’s canvas can we detect a devout Christian gay or lesbian adult couple in a committed, loving relationship, so scholars continuously debate whether the Apostle would have known of such persons. However, since he never refers to such, his writings can provide us with no basis for condemning something he never even mentions.

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