New Testament lecturer at the Perth Theological Hall of the Uniting Church in Australia, Methodist William Loader is especially known for his books on the background of the LXX (Septuagint), which is frequently and properly referred to for interpreting Paul’s sexual terminology and teaching, since the Apostle cites the LXX more frequently than the Hebrew (MT; see review of Kathy L. Gaca, 2003). I was especially glad to discover that Loader includes in his bibliography and refers (seven times) to my Queer Bible Commentary chapter on Romans (2006), a volume largely ignored by scholars who are not LGBTT.

Loader has long been a militant advocate of gay marriage and other human rights of sexual minorities in Australia. (You can Google the documents, including one for the Australian Senate, conveniently available on his website.) However, his treatment of the relevant biblical texts depends basically on his hermeneutic of love (André du Toit, cited, 2010:7), since he usually concludes that biblical writers probably are correctly interpreted by Robert Gagnon, whose two relevant books and website Loader refers to 40 times in the chapter that treats same-sex acts. At least his Gagnon citations include both relevant books and Web site references, and a respectable sprinkling of alternate voices are given a hearing (e.g. William Countryman, in his new 2007 edition, 11 times). Loader thus provides a wonderfully concise summary of most key debating points with endnotes referencing much of the most significant relevant bibliography.

However, the fact that, despite polls showing majority support for gay marriage in Australia, that nation’s House in Sept 2012 overwhelmingly defeated the proposal, confirms for me that total reliance on a hermeneutics of love without militant challenge to traditional heterosexist/homophobic exegesis of the relevant biblical texts, is a recipe for political disaster. (Granted, the Australian political context is complex, but the fact that in the UK the conservative prime minister advocates gay marriage, while in Australia the labor prime minister opposes it, is significant.) Seminary and university students may find a total dependence on hermeneutics sophisticated and sufficient for bolstering human rights for sexual minorities, but non-academic types (even including politicians) may need to hear stronger protests against traditional exegesis. Loader does present Gagnon’s exegetical conclusions as tentative and with a large place given to contesting voices, but more is needed. The complacent overconfidence of traditional reliance on a few biblical citations to justify homophobia is best challenged by a vigorous combination of exegetical and hermeneutical considerations. The interpreter should not choose either exegesis or hermeneutics but rigorously engage in both. Like Israel’s preference for alliances with Egypt, correctly denounced as a “weak reed” (2 Kings 18:21), an exclusive over-dependence on hermeneutics can unintentionally set back the cause of justice for the oppressed.

1. Non-explicit Texts (Loader’s views, 33-34)

1.1 Texts Traditionally Negative


Mark 7:20-21 and Acts 15:29 “would probably have implied prohibition of same-sex relations along with similar prohibitions in Leviticus 18, as in Acts 15:29 “ (Loader 34, citing Gagnon as on Acts 15:29). Acts 15:29 (Loader 34 cites Gagnon 2003:72, 75; see also 2001:435-36) but Lev 18:19 even prohibits sex with menstruants! Robert Gagnon (2001:435-37; 2003:72) and Richard Davidson (2007:334-35, 634-36) both interpret porneia in Mark 7:21 // Matt 15:19 as a technical Jewish legal term prohibiting all that Leviticus 18 and 20 condemn (highly unlikely) to argue that Jesus thus taught that homosexuality (porneia) is an abomination. Alas, sometimes when the cat swallows the canary but then insists it is still safe in the cage, a yellow feather floats gently to the floor that tells a different story. And such is the case when we try to “define” porneia in the New Testament with too much “help” from Leviticus. Both Gagnon and Davidson recognize that Leviticus 18 and 20 include a severe condemnation of a male who has sex with a menstruating woman (Lev 18:19; 20:18; see also Ezek 18:6; 22:10; 36:17). Gagnon nimbly sweeps the yellow feather under the rug and says “forget about it” (the church always has). Davidson, more consistently, insists that a [legalistic] biblical theology of sexuality must make clear that sex with a menstruating woman is always a terrible sin, on
the same level with incest, adultery, polygamy, homosexuality and bestiality (334; Jesus agreeing?!, 634). Confronted with Gagnon’s inconsistency and Davidson’s absurdity, Paul might plead attention to his “more excellent way” that involves focusing on a love for neighbor that avoids doing harm (1 Cor 13; Rom 13:8-10). The proposal that we should consider all the sexual references in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26 assumed in a single term is arbitrary and legalistic and fails to take into account the acceptance in the Hebrew Bible of levirate practices, polygamy, concubines and male recourse to prostitutes (see Reviews, Davidson www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar). Since many members in Paul’s churches were ex/slaves and would be required to sexually serve their owners or acquire for them income as prostitutes, would Paul have condemned them as guilty of porneia?! (Glancy 1998; Romans).

Mark 6:18 “The area of sexual mores is one where the early Christian movement appears rather traditional and not to have been in dispute. The exceptions to this indicate a conservative trend, such as on divorce and celibacy; its vision of the world to come as without sexual relations; and John the Baptist’s (and presumably Jesus’) extremely strict application of the incest laws of Leviticus 18 in relation to Herod Antipas (Mark 6:18)” (Loader 34, citing Loader 2005:158-60). Note. Given Hebrew Bible texts and dominant Jewish traditions emphasizing marriage for all and maximum procreation, to describe the early Christian movement as “traditional” and celibacy (Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul) as a “conservative trend” is hardly correct. Had sexual mores not been in dispute, Paul would not have written 1 Cor 5–7. Moreover, Jesus’ vision of the world to come involves not taking a wife or being given to a male authority, but is not necessarily without sex (Mark 12:25; Matt 22:30; Loader 2005:123-26). John the Baptist’s strict application of the incest laws of Leviticus in relation to Herod Antipas (Mark 6:18; similarly Paul in 1 Cor 5 on the man who married his mother-in-law) provides no basis for similar strictness regarding all the other laws in Leviticus 18 and 20, else the churches would be applying the death penalty for any male who has sex with a menstruant (18:19; 20:18; see above note on Hebrew Bible acceptance of levirate practices, polygamy, concubines and male recourse to prostitutes).


1 Thes 4:6 Possibly an allusion to same-sex predatory behavior, but “more likely refers to wrongdoing through adultery” (Loader 34).

1 Cor 7:5 (Loader 2010:34, citing Loader 2005:158-60). “Paul… simply assumes that prayer and sexual intercourse do not go well together, on the grounds, not of morality, but apparently of cultic purity, which apparently still plays a role in his thought about sex.”

Jude 6-7 (Loader 33, citing Gagnon 2001:58-9 [better, 87-90!]). “Refers to Sodom’s sexual sin as going literally ‘after strange flesh’, which could imply same-sex relations, if it does not refer to angels.”


Matthew 19:11-12 “Jesus’ employment of the image of the eunuch to explains and perhaps defend his own choice not to marry… reflects awareness that some people were eunuchs from birth, thus not sitting easily within the categories of male and female as some defined them and not able to perform what some then and now declare as the norm” (Loader 33, citing J. David Hester’s JSNT 2005 study referring to Jesus as “Postgender”; Loader indicates that some of the eunuchs referred to might have had same-sex preference, but that this remains speculative).

Mark 10:2-9 // Matthew 19:3-9 Here “Jesus uses Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as norm for marriage and ground for rejecting divorce, not to address same-sex relations, though he may well have understood these as excluding all other sexual relations” (Loader 33, citing Gagnon 2005:71[-72]). Note. See excursus on “Divorce” in Romans...
Mark; in the Bible no two texts say the same thing; Matthew permits one exception, Paul another; Ezra and Nehemiah command Israelite males to divorce their foreign wives; similarly Abraham and Hagar in Genesis.

1.2 Texts now often claimed as gay-positive

Matthew 8:5-13 // Luke 7:1-10 //? John 4:46-54 The centurion’s beloved slave. “Speculation that the centurion’s servant must be his slave also in a sexual sense… is most improbable” (Loader 33, citing Helminiak 127-29 and critique in Gagnon, Notes, n. 59). John 4 (//?) describes an official’s son. See the Centurion texts in Matthew and Luke.

John 14–21 Jesus’ relation with the beloved disciple as homoerotic. “Most improbable” (Loader 33, ignoring Ted Jennings book on the subject; citing Hanks’ “Romans” p. 584 in QBC and Gagnon Notes n. 59 referring only to the Centurion).

2 Six explicit “clobber” texts (Jude 7 lacing in Loader)

2.1 Romans 1:24, 26-27 Loader’s Conclusion (120) summarizes well his interpretation of Romans 1 (11-29):
“We began with same-sex relations, where Paul appears to use them like other Jews of the time, as a particularly crass instance of what happens when people turn away from the true God: for they also lose touch with their own reality and engage in unnatural sex. Also like other Jews Paul bases this judgment on what the biblical law prohibits [Lev 18; 20], but also on a range of supporting arguments, which include understanding what is natural in terms of how God created things, strong disapproval of excessive sexual passion, and the shamefulness of men taking women’s roles and women usurping men’s. About the only argument not taken up is that such intercourse does not produce offspring. In addition Paul’s descriptions do not focus on the abuse that often occurred in such relations (though not more than in heterosexual ones). Paul’s assessment, like the assessment reflected in the prohibitions which he never quotes, rest on a combination of these prior assumptions, rather than on any single one” [as noted above, Loader’s “hermeneutic of love” prevents him from accepting Paul’s views as normative for the church today; see my detailed critique below].

2.2-3 Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 Since the study of Saul Olyan (1994/97), biblical scholars generally recognize that the two texts refer only to male-male anal sex acts (not other homoerotic expressions or sexual “orientations,” much less to women/lesbians or “homosexuals”). Loader comments that the texts “probably served a succession of functions, [1] from family rules for survival (procreation), to [2] community demarcation from surrounding cultures, possibly with a view to particular religious practices, to [3] outlawing behaviour in which men were allegedly dishonoured by acting like women, to [4] upholding a sense of order understood not least as divine creation” (9). He adds, however, that “our focus is how they were read in the NT times” and concludes that “fortunately we have three clear instances of the exposition of Leviticus 18:22”: Pseudo-Phocylides, Philo and Josephus (roughly contemporary to Jesus and Paul, whom he cites in detail; 9-10). These three Jewish authors assume that Leviticus refers to all acts of male-male anal sex (everyone is either an active penetrator or passive penetrated) as opposed to the only proper sexual expression, that between husband and wife with intent to procreate (Loader 2010: 8-10; cf. Hanks 2011:26-39; see below on Romans).

2.4 Gen 19:1-29 The incident at Sodom “depicts violent inhospitality through attempted male rape” (Loader 10; similarly Hanks 2011:6-25). Paul’s contemporary, Philo, provides the first clear example of interpretations that saw Sodom’s sin not only in such violent inhospitality but also more generally in same-sex intercourse, depicting the men of Sodom as overwhelmed by lust for pleasure, engaging in excess like animals, both committing adultery and mounting other men in disregard of what is natural and divinely made. Similarly the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs argues that the people of Sodom departed from the order of nature established in creation, as did also the Watchers, the angels who descended to earth and had sex with women, procreating giants (Gen 6:1-4; see above on Jude 6-7 and Hanks 2011:56-75).

Gen 1:27 and 2:20-24 depict the making of male and female and then their rejoining. “These texts quite clearly serve as a basis for instruction about Christian marriage…in Mark 10:2-9 [male-female sex as definitive and exclusive].” However, “it is unlikely that the NT authors read them as definitive in the sense that everyone must marry to be complete, since this is manifestly not the case with those called to celibacy” (Loader 10-11)
2.5 1 Timothy 1:9-11 (Loader 32b-33a) A deuteronarrative vice list that refers to the Law of Moses and reflects the order of the Decalogue, using the commandments as umbrella terms. Included are: “fornicators [pornois, male prostitutes], arsenokoitai [male-b Fedders], slave traders….” According to Loader, arsenokoitai may thus refer (1) “generally to men engaging in same-sex discourse” (similar to Pseudo-Phocylides, which links male-male passion to adultery; (2) to a slave trade “enslaving young men as prostitutes” who are then abused by the male-b Fedders (Scroggs 1983; J. Albert Harrill 1999); (3) to the passive partner “not as one to be condemned but as a victim of slave traders”; (4) to “the slave traders being condemned on much broader grounds [sexual: adultery, not just for stealing].” Loader expresses no preference for any of these alternatives but notes that our four earliest post-pauline occurrences of arsenokoitai are not simply sexual but imply some kind of violence (Loader 32b-33a, citing Gagnon 334 [332-36] and Scroggs 1983:119-20; see Hanks 2011:40-55). Against the common modern mistranslation “homosexuals” we should note that instead of the two terms in 1 Cor 6:9 (“soft-males…male-b Fedders” [passive and active in anal sex?]), only arsenokoitai is used in 1 Tim 1:10.

2.6 1 Corinthians 6:9 The link between arsenokoitai (male-b Fedders) and slave traders in 1 Tim 1:10 clarifies the more difficult and disputed interpretation of “soft-males and male-b Fedders” (arsenokoitai) in Paul’s earlier vice list in 1 Cor 6:9, commonly mistranslated as “homosexuals” (since the RSV NT, 1946). However, since Paul heads this list with the term adikoi (unjust, violent oppressors) and our four earliest post-pauline uses of arsenokoitai involve violent economic exploitation (like enslavement of youth to serve as prostitutes), obviously Paul does not refer to loving consensual adult same-sex acts, much less to anyone’s sexual orientation, or as including females (as the mistranslation “homosexuals” would imply). Loader recognizes these points but also argues that the possible derivation of arsenokoitai from arsen (male) and koi (bed) in the LXX of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 would mean that “the term probably would be understood by those who first used it as naming those who contravened these prohibitions, and, where these were understood as universal, referring to all men who engage in sex with other men, whatever their age or status…. If this is its intent, then it is likely that we should read malakoi in that light, so that the two words would refer to the passive and active participation in all [anal!] same-sex relations or some form of them, commercial or/and abusive” (31-32; Loader thus gives priority to dubious etymology over clear usage and context!). However, between this universalizing approach (condemning all male-male anal sex) and the approach limiting the exclusion from God’s just kingdom to those who are unjust/violent oppressors, Loader concludes “It is impossible to know for sure” (32; Loader 29c-33a + 19 endnotes, including Gagnon n. 111, who tries to argue that the reference to male-male anal sex in 1 Cor 6:9 implies inclusion of females in lesbian non-anal sex!; cf. Hanks 2011:40-55).

3 Romans 1:24, 26-27 Loader dedicates 20+ pages from an impressive variety of recent academic studies on Paul and Romans and thus provides the most helpful current overview of the difficult interpretive questions, both exegetical and hermeneutical, still debated (2010:11-29 plus endnotes #9-97, pp. 127-31). In his concise overview, some points deserve emphasis/ elaboration, but others must be challenged.

3.1 One weakness immediately indicated is Loader’s introductory citation of Rom 1:24, 26-27 (2010:11), which omits the denunciation of idolatry in 1:25 (referring back to Paul’s tracing the origins of idolatry in 1:18-23), as well as the first springing of the rhetorical trap in 2:1-16 (see below). This omission obscures the fact that Paul here is not referring to his contemporaries—much less ours—but to the decision of humanity’s primeval ancestors whom the Apostle charges with abandoning their original monotheism in exchange (1:23) for the worship of idolatrous images (see the past/aorist verbs in 1:21-23). Like most commentators, Loader concludes that in 1:18-32 Paul repeats common Jewish teaching evident in Wisdom 13:1-14:31 (see Robert Gagnon, cited in note 17). However, Wisdom refers to the ignorance of contemporary Gentile idolaters, but Paul, to the contrary, emphasizes the clarity of God’s revelation in creation and the willful idolatrous rebellion of humanity’s primeval ancestors (Douglas Campbell 2009:360-62). Unlike most commentators, Loader (14b) contrasts God’s wrath (1:18; 2:5) with God’s goodness, but this overlooks Paul’s emphasis on human injustice/violence/oppression (adikia) as the object of God’s wrath and the fact that from the perspective of the poor/weak/oppressed God’s anger at their oppressors is an essential part of God’s goodness and “Good News” (Rom 2:16). The oppressed do not want God to be indifferent to the violence they suffer (Hanks 1972).

3.2 Loader (28b) prefaxes his treatment of Romans 1:24, 26-27 with comments on the purported influence of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in Romans 1 (see above on Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), explaining that Paul was
influenced by “[1] his Jewish biblical heritage and [2] from contemporary Jewish and [3] Graeco-Roman discussions” (29). Notably, however, the canon of Paul’s “Jewish biblical heritage” seems strangely limited to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, whereas Loader, ignoring the growing scholarly literature to the contrary, excludes the narrative examples of Ruth and Naomi and of David and Jonathan, as well as \textit{Song of Songs}, the only canonical book dedicated to the theme of erotic love (outside the context of marriage and—like Paul—with no interest in procreation). If Paul was a repressed homosexual (see Hanks 2012), we should not be surprised if his letters reflect awareness of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, but we should not equate awareness with imposing these texts as norms for his churches (when Paul would draw on Leviticus as a source of norms for his churches he is highly selective; see neighbor love from Lev 19:18 cited in Rom 13:8-10 and Gal 5:14). In fact, just as Paul separated his sole reference to Sodom (Rom 9:29) from his reference to male-male anal sex (1:27), so in Romans 1, his concluding reference to those who “deserve death” (1:32) concludes his vice list headed by the “unjust/violent oppressors” (1:29-31), not his references to the unclean sexual practices of idolaters (1:24-27).

The other basis some use to substantiate Paul’s advocacy of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as providing universal ethical norms for his churches is the theory that the “male-bedders” (arsenokoitai) in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 is a word Paul himself coined from two words (male + bed) in the LXX translation. Granted, someone may have invented the word that way, but if the word didn’t exist until Paul coined it, how could he expect the church in Corinth to understand what he meant? (The Church has been struggling for 2000 years to figure out specifically what he meant!) And finally, Loader’s interpretation overlooks his own comments regarding the rhetorical trap Paul is laying in Rom 1:18-32 (see below). The Apostle when laying his trap might well slip in an allusion to Lev 18:22 and 20:13 (as in Rom 1:32; Loader 14, 28) to tempt judgmental readers to tumble in, but that is a far cry from seriously proposing that these two texts (not to mention all the rest of the Holiness Code) become absolute ethical norms for the churches. And if the original Jewish author’s intent in Leviticus 18 and 20 was to maximize procreation (see Jacob Milgrom, \textit{AB Leviticus}) Paul’s indifference to that concern hardly reflects the thrust of the original meaning. However, if Rom 1:26-27 only refers to male-male same-sex acts with 1:26 indicating women in heterosexual “unnatural” acts (anal sex to avoid procreation; see below), this limitation would reflect well the Hebrew Bible and dominant Jewish tradition (on Leviticus see above on Loader 8-10, 14a, \textbf{28}, and 31, with his citations of Brooten 1996:89, 217 and Gagnon 2001:122; 2003:81).

3.3 Paul lays his Rhetorical Trap, 1:18-32. Bernadette Brooten concludes her interpretation of Romans 1:18-32 by referring to Paul as trying “to persuade his readers” with his purported “condemnation of homoeroticism” (1996:302). Jewett insists that \textit{no persuasion} would have been necessary since Paul could have counted on the audience in Roman house and tenement churches in 57 AD to applaud the negative rhetoric (2007:173). Most perceptive, however, is the conclusion of Diana Swancutt that \textit{Paul’s aim} in 1:18-32 is \textit{not to persuade}, but to \textit{entrapping}, and that to interpret 1:18-32 correctly we must recognize that the rhetoric reaches its climax only when the trap is first sprung in 2:1-16 and judgmental members of the audience are caught (Swancutt 2003:193-233; 2004:42-73; Hanks 2006:596-598). Until 2:17 (“you who call yourself a Jew”), Paul is coy about the identity of the “men/persons” he describes (1:18; “them…to them,” v. 19, etc.). His rhetorical skill is such that, as 1:18-32 was read in the Roman tenement/house churches, both Jews and non-Jews would be asking themselves continually, “Does that mean me?” If they began to feel superior, assured themselves that it did not, and condemned the idolatrous oppressors of Rom 1:18-23, 28-32, they tumbled neatly into Paul’s rhetorical trap (2:1-16).

However, as Jewett points out (2007:197-98), the Roman readers would not even realize that they themselves also had been rhetorically entrapped in 2:1-16 until Paul directly denounces their pride in 14:1–15:13: “That this verb \textit{krinein} recurs in the context of Paul’s critique of the judgmental spirit within the Roman churches (14:3-5, 10, 13, 22) renders it likely that he is building a rhetorical argument here whose full relevance will emerge later…. The peculiarities of this passage can be explained by Paul’s rhetorical goal of creating an argument for an ethic of mutual acceptance and welcome between the competitive house and tenement churches in Rome, which would enable them to participate with integrity in the Spanish mission” (2007:197). Jewett thus astutely points out that Paul’s “brilliant” (200) and “elaborate rhetorical trap” (203) only will have the desired effect when the audience finally hears the reproaches about their own judging of one another in Chapter 14 (2007:197).
Paul’s rhetorical entrapment of hypocrites (both Gentiles and Jews, 2:1-29) who are judgmental of others regarding diverse lifestyles thus fits perfectly with Jewett’s understanding of the letter’s ultimate purpose in uniting the strong and the weak in the 5-10 tenement and house churches in support of the Apostle’s prospective mission to the Spanish barbarians. “The audience says to themselves ‘those hypocrites think they are exempt from wrath, but we know better!’ It is a brilliant rhetorical trap [for both the strong and weak parties hearing the letter in Rome]” (200). “They will not realize until chap. 14 that their own bigotry toward one another is another form of treating God’s kindness with contempt, and that another stage of repentance is now required” (202; see also note 91). Thus, as Douglas Campbell makes clear, in Romans 1:18–4:25 Paul is not explaining to sinful unbelievers how they may become Christians (as the text, addressed to believers, is commonly misused), but laying the groundwork for his concluding pastoral admonitions to the divided tenement and house churches in 12:1–16:26 (on Campbell, see Gorman 2011:103-04).

Loader analyzes Paul’s strategy in 1:18-32 but prefers to call it a rhetorical ploy (13) that uses the baseball/cricket game metaphor (“caught out”), thus avoiding the hunter metaphor “trap,” which seems to suggest that a rhetorical trap is not to be “taken seriously” (David, who fell into Nathan’s trap, might disagree! 2 Sam 12): “What follows in 2:1-16 dramatically turns attention back on the accusers who had been so appreciating Paul’s statements thus far. The way Paul’s rhetoric works at this point suggests that he expects some among his hearers to be caught out…. If the primary aim is to catch out those who had somehow set themselves above and beyond the Gentiles and depict all, Jews and Gentiles, as sinners (3:9), then one might wonder whether what Paul says of Gentiles is to be taken seriously at all or is just a ploy or a kind of role-play. In 1:18–32 Paul would then be role-playing the hypocrite of 2:1 and accordingly such hypocrisy, together with its claims, should be summarily dismissed, including alleged statements about same-sex relations” (2010:12-13).

Loader, however, perceptively raises a key question (though poorly worded) stemming from Paul’s laying of his rhetorical trap in 1:18-32 (overlooked by most commentators): “How do we determine what is rhetorical play from what Paul really means?” (13). Loader’s conclusion is that “Paul is… engaging in a rhetorical ploy. He sets up those Christian Jew who would join his condemnation of Gentiles with glee, only to confront them in 2:1-16 with their own sin, but not in a way that he takes back anything he has said thus far about Gentiles” (13-14; my emphasis). I have argued, rather, that in laying his rhetorical trap in 1:18-32, Paul “really means” everything but intentionally employs a series of ambiguous terms, which hypocritical judgmental readers will seize upon in their rush into his trap, while he, as the letter unfolds, proceeds to redefine and deconstruct his terminology, revealing a profounder dialectical theology (see Douglas Campbell 2010). In this deconstruction process, which Loader and earlier commentators overlook:

(1) Some behavior is “dirty/impure” (1:24) but later all things are declared cleansed (14:20).
(2) “Unnatural” behavior sounds condemned (1:26-27), but we later learn that even God sometimes acts contrary to nature (11:24).
(3) Some behavior is shameful/dishonorable (1:24, 26-27), but Paul reveals that he is “not ashamed” of his message of a crucified savior (1:16), since that shameful crucifixion is God’s means of cosmic redemption (3:21-26).
(4) “Changes” are suspect, whether they involve changing God for idols (1:19-23) or changing sexual practices (1:24, 26-27), but personal change may also constitute the essence of sanctification (12:1-2) and even involve transforming the entire cosmos (8:18-23).

3.4 In Rom 1:26-27 “Was Paul talking about heterosexuals and homosexuals?” (20-22). In 1980 John Boswell proposed that those whom Paul purportedly condemned in Romans 1:26-27 were not homosexuals, but heterosexual men engaging in homosexual acts (109; cited Loader 20b). However, in 1996 Brooten provided ample evidence that “many people were aware of men and women whose sexual preferences were directed to people of their own sex, including lifelong orientation” [orientation?]. She finds evidence in magical practices and in discourses of medicine, astrology and philosophy [Loader 20-21, citing Brooten 1996:8-9; Schoedel 2000:55; Smith JAAR 1996:223-56]. “Such discussions are not to be equated with the complex theories of orientation of modern times and are at best rudimentary [endnote #39 citing du Toit 2003:103-4], but were sufficiently widely attested to have been within Paul’s knowledge. It is difficult to measure whether Paul was aware of such distinctions and then how he might have responded to them with assent or dissent” [Loader 21; endnote #40, citing Gagnon 2003:81, 102]
Gagnon cites Brooten’s evidence to argue that Paul would have been aware of stable differences in sexual preference/orientation, but that when Paul refers to the sexual exchanges (Rom 1:26-27) “he is referring not to orientation…but to actions, as in 1:26 where what was exchanged was natural intercourse….Having such dishonourable passions is no excuse for acting them out….Gagnon ultimately appeals to the fall of Adam. He writes of ‘innate passions perverted by the fall and exacerbated by idol worship’ (Loader 20; citing Gagnon #41-43, Notes n. 136, 142). Loader, however, more convincingly concludes (21c):

“In all likelihood he [Paul] would have believed ultimately that all people are heterosexual on the basis of the creation stories according to which God made them male and female and/or because this was what he saw as natural. Most who continue…to espouse this view see the assumptions of both Boswell and Gagnon, that Paul operated with categories equivalent to homosexual and heterosexual as used in contemporary discussion, as anachronistic” [#44 Collins 2000:142; du Toit 2003:104; Via 2003:16].

3.5 Four deconstructions (mostly ignored or left unrelated to Rom 1:24-27!): (1) uncleanness, (2) unnatural, (3) shameful, (4) changes; cf. (5) covetousness, not deconstructed. Paul emphasizes (3x) that “God gave them up/over (1:24, 26, 28), which Robert Gagnon interprets as a parental image, but Jewett, more correctly, as a judicial image of a judge handing over the guilty to be punished (Loader 15 with notes 18-19).

(1) “Uncleanness” (Rom 1:24)—not necessarily sinful. William Countryman first emphasized that in 1:24 Paul categorized the sexual practices of 1:24, 26-27, not as “sin” (a term occurring only later—2:12 and 3:9), but as akatharsia (“uncleanness, impurity”), (1988:117; 2003:110-116: see Daniel Helminiak 2000:93-94; 2003:161-163). Countryman later maintained and strengthened his original basic position: “The language [in 1:24] is certainly pejorative; and yet it stops short of actually saying that this aspect of Gentile culture is intrinsically sinful or deserving of God’s wrath. Paul’s argument is rather that God has ‘handed over’ the Gentiles to their disgusting culture as punishment for another sin, idolatry” (2003:174). And since Paul is laying a rhetorical trap for judgmental listeners, intentional employment of ambiguous terms that often imply sinfulness fits perfectly into his game plan (with “uncleanness” see also “desire/lust,” “unnatural,” “change”).

Loeder comments: “Countryman, who takes Paul’s rhetorical play seriously, suggests that Paul addresses two different kinds of things in 1:18-32, both the result of idolatry: sin and dirty practices….In the role-play which Paul sets up, the hypocrite…despises dirty Gentiles and their ways, just as elsewhere he might despise them for being uncircumcised and eating unclean food….Paul dismisses such Jewish scruples about food, Sabbath and sex. Christians no longer live under the law but under grace” (2010:13). Loader also notes Countryman’s translation “having been filled” [followed by Helminiak 2000:77-83] preceding the list of sins in 1:29, but considers simply “filled” as adequate, thus eliminating Countryman’s chronological restructuring: 1:18-23 → 28-32 → 24-27). Following Schmidt and Gagnon Loader insists that “Paul…commonly used the language of impurity to address serious moral issues, especially in the sexual area” (14, citing 1 Thess 4:3-7; also p. 16). Remarkably, however, although Loader here (endnotes 12 and 15) cites my QBC Romans commentary and related literature, he does not cite Paul’s text itself, where the Apostle boldly declares “All things are clean” (Rom 14:14, 20, commonly mistranslated “All food is clean,” as in NVI). This omission encourages readers to miss the connection/deconstruction? with 1:24 (see also Jesus in Mark 7:19; Titus 1:15; Hanks 2000:90-94; 2010:147-150). Both Hultgren (2011:517) and Jewett (2007:859, 866-67) also failed to relate Paul’s declaring all things clean (14:20) to the “uncleanness” in 1:24. Loader, moreover, does not cite Rom 6:19 where, even before voiding the category, Paul subversively redefines “uncleanness” to signify, not cultic sexual categories, but as referring to injustice, oppression, and exploitation (6:12-13; Hanks 2000:26; pace Schmidt 1995:75).

In biblical literature the idolatry condemned (as in Rom 1:18-23, 25) commonly refers to the religions of cruelly oppressive empires, so writers like Paul naturally link the idolatrous worship that rationalizes oppressive behavior with sexual abuse (Hanks 1983/82; 1992). These factors suggest that in so far as the Gentile “unclean” sexual behavior involved acts that could also be sinful, the reference would not be to loving consensual sexual acts between adults, but to abuses of power in idolatrous contexts: rape (Sodom), paedophilia and the sexual exploitation of unwilling slaves. But whether we emphasize the dominant condemnation of idolatry and oppression (1:18-23, 25, 29) and/or accept Countryman’s case for the “bracketing” of sexual practices as “unclean” but not necessarily sinful (1:24, 26-27), the rhetorical trap (2:1-
16) renders impossible any effort to extricate from Rom 1:24, 26-27 “ethical absolutes” condemning all homoerotic sex. As Countryman reminds us, “Same-gender sexual acts are treated here [in Rom 1:27] not as sinful but as consequences of a prior sin” (that of idolatry; 2003:177).

Countryman shows how earlier general instruction on believers’ praxis prepares the later deconstruction of uncleanness: whatever love commands suffices to satisfy the Law, even if it does not fulfill its letter [13:8-10]. Concerning 14:14 (“nothing is unclean in itself”) he observes: “It would not be a mistake to call this the central affirmation of Romans. I do not say that it is the central affirmation of Paul’s faith; chapters 7–8 may give us a closer view of that. But it is the principle that Paul sees as necessary to any resolution of the conflict over food purity in the church at Rome” (2003:205). Countryman concludes:

The Letter to Romans has a large and coherent structure…. The larger part of it…is constructed in the form of two extended, parallel entrapments. In these, Paul hopes to neutralize potential opposition by showing those who assume an easy superiority to people of the opposite ethnicity that they have no real claim…. The two ‘entrapments’ (1:18-32; chaps 9–11) came to be read as theological set pieces on the evils of homosexuality and Judaism, respectively, instead of playing their rhetorical function of entrapment for two distinct groups of Christians who prided themselves on their ethnicity and looked down on those who differed” (2003:211-12; [see Boswell 1980 on anti-Semitism and homophobia])…. “It is deeply distressing that Romans 1 and 9 have come to be read as affirmations of Christian cultural prejudices, whether against same-gender sexual partners or against Jews. Passages that began as entrapments for the proud have now become bulwarks of our pride…. It is obscene that what began as an exercise in exposing the self-confidence of the proud has so long been an excuse for Christian arrogance and violence against gay-lesbian people and Jews” (2003:217).

Rom 1:18-32 + 2:1-16 thus constitutes the first entrapment where Paul sets up those Jews and others like them who felt themselves superior to the common “unclean” Gentile culture. Rom 9:1-29 + 9:30–11:36 constitutes the second entrapment, where Paul sets up those Gentiles and others like them who felt themselves superior to more traditional Jews. The trap is set in 9:1-29 and then sprung in 9:30–11:36 with the teaching that the branches broken off eventually will be restored. The springing of the trap is then extended to 15:13, including the teaching that all things have become clean (14:14, 20).

(2) “What is ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ according to Paul?” (2010:23-28). In his detailed treatment of Paul’s phrase “against/beyond nature” (para phusin, 1:26), Loader points out that the Apostle introduces terminology deriving from Greek philosophy rather than Biblical theology (the Hebrew Bible and Jesus avoided such terminology, preferring to refer to God as creator and concrete examples of his creation): “The connection between what Gentiles saw as the natural world and what Paul saw as the creation, on the one hand, and its Creator on the other, is explicit in 1:18-23, and clear in 1:25 with the charge that they worship the creature rather than the Creator” (27). Loader, however, fails to mention that elsewhere in the New Testament humans are expected to transcend irrational natural animal behavior (→ Jude 10; deceptively translated “instinct” in the NIV and NRSV) and that many studies reveal what a slippery, ambiguous term “nature/natural” is the history of human ideologies and philosophies (Hanks 2000:244-45, citing details from Volker Sommer, Wider die Natur: Homosexualität und Evolution, 1990). In fact, Jacques Ellul might say that the term qualifies as a prime example common in “majority propaganda” (the most dangerous kind) to impose cultural prejudices on oppressed minorities. Loader even leaves the uninformed reader with the impression that Plato was correct in denying the existence of “unnatural” same-sex behavior in the animal world (25). However, John Boswell’s classic study made clear (1980) that observation of same-sex erotic behavior and pair-bonding in animals goes back at least to Aristotle and Bruce Bagemihl’s study documents (1999) homosexual behavior in more than 450 species of mammals, birds, reptiles and insects (and now more than 1500 species have been documented).

In his treatment of un/natural Loader also fails to take into account that, since in Rom 1:18-32 Paul is laying his rhetorical trap, the purposeful use of ambiguous terminology precisely fits his purpose, preparing for his later deconstruction of ambiguous terms as the letter develops and the trap is repeatedly sprung (Hanks 2011:105-108). Thus, behavior “against/beyond nature” (1:26-27) is precisely what God engaged in when engrafting/inserting believing Gentiles into the Olive tree of God’s people (Israel, Rom 11:24; Hanks 2000:92).
Moreover, by referring to Gentiles as *uncircumcised* “by nature” (2:27) Paul recognizes circumcision itself to be a human cultural imposition and thus an act “against nature”; see also the Gentiles not having the Law from/by birth (2:14; see below).

Loader, however, follows Gagnon’s argument that “Paul is addressing the situation of Gentiles who without the witness of Scriptures should have recognized God in nature, the created world and should have also seen that it was against nature to engage in same-sex acts….Gagnon speculates that Paul would have in mind as the primary argument from nature the complementarity of human sexual genitalia: the penis fits the vagina, an appeal to visual observation as in 1:19-23. To support this proposal he notes [Craig] William’s observation that ‘some kind of argument from ‘design’ seems to lurk in the background of Cicero’s Seneca’s and Musonius’ claims: the penis is ‘designed’ to penetrate the vagina, the vagina is ‘designed’ to be penetrated by the penis’ (Loader 23-24). Of course, where intention to procreate is absent, one could also argue that the penis is ‘designed’ to fit in the hand, mouth or anus and thus give similar pleasure!

More perceptively, Douglas Campbell argues that one of the “intrinsic difficulties” in such traditional Justification Theory interpretations of Romans is Natural Revelation that “builds from the objective discernment and lineage of certain positions within creation—a universal recognition and derivation that, in strictly rational terms, is impossible….theism → monotheism → divine transcendence /unimageability → divine retributive justice → divine concern for human heterosexuality → and monogamy → divine concern for a fuller ethical system…. Such attributes and concerns cannot be shown to derive in strictly rational terms from the bland god of the philosophers. How do we deduce, by contemplating the cosmos, that a single transcendent god is offended by homosexuality?” (2009:39-45).

Although Loader ignores the use and significance of the double reference to acts “against nature” in Rom 1:26 and 11:24, failing even to cite the latter reference, he does refer to Paul’s problematic use in 1 Cor 11:13-14: “Paul employs the word *physis*, ‘nature’ elsewhere to describe the way things are and the right order of things in much the same way as did the philosophers of his time, whose language and terms he is employing. This is even true of his statement in 1 Corinthians 11:13-14 that for men to have long hair is unnatural. We might define that as cultural convention, as Helminiak proposes also for Romans [note 59 2000:85-86], but [William] Schoedel argues that *Paul* sees natural as proper, the way nature and creation was meant to be [24; note 60 2000:59-63].” What Helminiak proposed, of course, was simply to take the commonly recognized meaning of “nature” (= culture) in 1 Cor 11:14 as applicable to Romans 1:26 (→ 1 Corinthians, commentaries of Gordon Fee 1987:526-27; Anthony Thiselton 2006:176-77; 2000:844-48; David Garland 2003:530). Loader’s treatment here obscures what most recognize as the diversity of means in Paul’s terminology of un/natural (23-24).

Remarkably, however, even Paul Jewett ignores the fact that Paul uses “para *phusin*” in both Romans 1:26 and 11:24 (the only uses of the phrase in the entire New Testament!) and thus fails to recognize as significant that in 11:24 it is God who “against nature” engrafts the Gentiles into the Jewish Olive Tree (2007:172-76, 692-93; similarly ignored by Hultgren 2011:411). Bernadette Brooten in a footnote does cite Daniel Helminiak’s reference to Romans’ double occurrences of *para physis* in Romans 1:26 and 11:24, but dismisses its significance as “methodologically problematic… because the two contexts differ so sharply” (1996:246, note 88). The contrast between the two contexts, however, is precisely what empowers the deconstruction. As Ted Jennings emphasizes, Paul (like Jesus, Mat 19:12, Lk 14:26, 18:29) counsels disciples to avoid marriage and procreation (1 Cor 7:7-8, 32-35; Jennings 2009:131-38). Instead of “natural” procreative sex (abandoned in Rom 1:26-27 and never practiced or recommended by Paul), the aim of the Apostle to the Gentiles is to “harvest much fruit” (1:13; cf. John 15:1-17) in winning more Gentiles to the faith, who are then engrafted by God “against nature” into the Olive Tree (God’s people; Rom 11:11-24).

Already in Romans 2 Paul begins his *deconstruction of “against nature”* (*para phusis*, 1:26) by making circumcision itself a cultural imposition, an act *against* nature that God himself commanded (2:27)! As commentators universally recognize, Paul refers to nature (*phusis*) in its most common meaning in 2:27, when he refers to the Gentiles as those who are “not circumcised by nature.” Even Robert Gagnon admits that Paul in effect says that the cutting of the foreskin in the act of circumcision is an act “against nature” (2001:372, note 34)—and hence when God commanded Abraham and his male offspring and slaves to be circumcised, he was commanding them to undertake an act “against nature” (Gen 17). The NIV, rushing to protect evangelical
readers from straying into such heresy, disguises Paul’s deconstruction process by translating “by nature” as “physically” (2:27), so the reader misses the link Paul established with the phrase “against nature” in 1:26 and 11:24. As Tom Wright points out, “All males are ‘naturally uncircumcised’ in the sense that they are born that way” (2002:448, note 73). Wright, in fact, concludes that, except for the reference to an abstract nature in 1 Cor 11:14 (male and female hair length), all the other Pauline usages refer to the status people have by birth or race (even Rom 1:26).

Moreover, the earlier, more ambiguous text (Rom 2:14) is best translated: “For whenever Gentiles who do not possess Torah by nature (phrasei) the things of the Torah do, these, though not having the Torah, are a law to themselves” (cf. the NIV “do by nature,” instead of “Gentiles by nature” in 2:14). Two recent evangelical commentators recognize that Paul uses “by nature” in the same sense (“by birth”) in both Rom 2:14 and 27 (Schreiner 1998:123; Wright 2002:441-42; earlier Cranfield; pace Gagnon 2001:371, note 32). Wright points out that Paul always uses plusis in an adjectival phrase (“Gentiles by nature,” 2:14), not adverbially (“by nature do”; 1996:145, citing Paul Achtemeier 1985:45). John Boswell first pointed out the significance of God’s acting “against nature” (11:24) for interpreting Paul’s rhetoric in 1:26-27 (1980:112; also Countryman 1988:113-114; 2007:112-114; Helminiai 2000:80-86) but ignored in the polemics of Thomas Schmidt (see 1995:8 and 191 note 41) in his determination to equate “against nature” in 1:26-27 with sin; cf. Gagnon (2001:390, note 68). As Eugene Rogers emphasized, in 11:24 Paul deconstructs his rhetoric about sexual acts “against nature,” affirming that God himself acted “in excess of nature” by grafting unclean Gentile branches into the pure olive tree (Israel). Such divine action that transcends “nature” was to be celebrated (Rom 11:32-36; 15:7-13), not condemned: “Gentiles are so foreign to the God of Israel that Paul can say that God acts ‘contrary to nature,’ para plusin, in grafting them in. A phrase more liable to provoke…is difficult to imagine. Does Paul mean to compare God’s activity to homosexual activity?” (Rogers 1999:64).

Elizabeth Stuart adds, “Paul’s use of this phrase in Romans 11:24 is shocking considering his previous use of the phrase earlier in this letter to describe, not homosexual people, but Gentiles who characteristically engage in same-sex activity, a characteristic that distinguishes them, not from heterosexuals, but from Jews… Paul is making the outrageous claim that God stands in solidarity with these Gentiles; God like them acts against, or more accurately, in excess of nature” (2003:96). Rogers concludes that just as God saved flesh by taking it on by birth‖ in both nature (Rom 1:26; cf. ―BOASTING‖ in our (1:27; cf. 1:28).

(3) Honor and Shame. Much attention has been given to New Testament and Pauline cultural-anthropological perspectives on honor/shame (Moxnes 1988:207-18; Brooten 1996:208-212; Jewett 1997:25-73). Few have recognized, however, that this perspective constitutes the third element in Paul’s deconstruction of Rom 1:24, 26-27 (Hanks 2000:92). Just as each verse focuses on strong/excess desire, each emphasizes the shameful consequences of such desire, which suggest a lack of self-control and discipline:

- “desires of their hearts…to be dishonored their bodies among themselves....” (1:24; Loader 16)
- “females…passions of dishonor” (1:26)
- “males burned in desire…the shamelessness working” (1:27; cf. 1:28).

Although society condemns “shameful” behavior (1:24, 26-27), Jesus’ SHAMEFUL CRUCIFIXION was God’s decisive instrument of liberating justice and cosmic redemption (1:16; 3:21-26; cf. “BOASTING” in our hope, suffering and in God (Rom 5:1-3, 11); see Jesus “despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2; Hanks 1990:92). However, Jewett and Loader fail to relate crucifixion shame to that of 1:24-27 (2007:46-51, 173, 275, 293). Nevertheless, in Paul’s gospel, Jesus’ crucifixion (naked)—the most shameful experience in antiquity—is the central element (Rom. 3:21-26)! Thus Paul later deconstructs his earlier rhetoric with the presentation of Jesus’
crucifixion (together with the resurrection) as central to God’s cosmic redemption and liberation. In evident anticipation of the later emphasis on a crucified Messiah, in 1:16 Paul already has declared himself “not ashamed” of his gospel. The Apostle proceeds to encourage humble members of the tenement churches in Rome (overwhelmingly sexual minorities, mainly slave-class, led by women) to assert their human dignity as God’s sons and heirs and learn to “boast” of culturally shameful experiences. Thus the three-fold references to shame in 1:24, 26-27 find an echo in the three references to appropriate boasting in Romans 5:2-3, 11, where marginalized church members, formerly falling short of the glory of God, are now justified (3:23; 5:1). Troels Engberg-Pedersen concludes that Paul uses the term kauchasthai (boasting) "in a reinterpreted manner that almost makes it a term of art for the new relationship with God" (2000:222).

One of Jewett’s earlier insights, however, is especially relevant: “On one level, shame is the embarrassment in getting caught. But at another level, shame is felt when others demean people on prejudicial grounds, not because of what they have done but because of their identity, whether it be racial, cultural, sexual or religious. The most damaging form of shame is internalizing such evaluations, which imply that persons or groups are worthless, that their lives are without significance (lecture, “Honor and Shame in Pauline Theology: A Preliminary Probe”; ACTS Colleague Presentations, 14 December 1995, p. 1; italics mine). Moreover, in the context of Romans 1 Loader undoubtedly is correct to point out that shame in the sexual sense “could refer to a man being made to take a female role, in particular, in sexual intercourse,” which also explains “the use of male rape to subjugate enemies”(16)—and would be extended logically to women abandoning feminine roles. .

Note. Passions. Above we noted the great emphasis Paul places on passions/desires in each verse Loader treats (Rom 1:24, 26-27). Already in considering Countryman’s bracketing of 1:24-27 as indicating uncleanness, not sin, we noted the ambiguity that permits each term to be translated neutrally as (strong) desire, passion, or pejoratively as covetings or lust. Loader summarizes David Frederickson’s important treatment raising the question of Paul’s understanding of the origin/cause of the unnatural same-sex desires and acts in 1:27. Frederickson, he says, points to “authors who express the view that same-sex acts are the result of people’s passions getting out of control and who, like Paul, also speak of a self-inflicted punishment. In addition he claims that ‘Paul is not speaking of the externalization of sexual orientation deep in the individual’s personality. Rather he expresses the philosophic view that passion invades from outside and overwhelms the subject. Paul’s repeated allusions to passions in his account appear to indicate that Paul, too, sees same-sex intercourse as the result of such excessive desire” (26). Although Loader concludes that passions getting out of control is only one factor, he later refers simply to “the gross impact of uncontrolled passions which lead to same-sex acts” (29). He also cites Gagnon as referring to “innate passions perverted by the fall and exacerbated by idol worship”’ (Loader 21; citing Gagnon’s Notes n. 136, 142). As many point out, however, in Romans Adam enters the picture (sans Eve) as responsible for the Fall only in 5:12-21 (cf. Eve the guilty one, not Adam, in 1 Tim 5:11-15), but Paul’s Decline of Civilization narrative with a primeval invention of idolatry (not indicated in Genesis 1-3) presents a different picture. Dale Martin astutely critiques the heterosexist ideologies in traditional interpretations of Rom 1:18-32:

Paul’s…logic assumes a mythological structure unknown to most modern persons, Christians included. Most of us do not believe that all of humanity was once upon a time neatly monotheistic, only later, at a particular historical point, to turn to polytheism and idolatry; nor are we likely to believe that homosexuality did not exist until a sudden invention of polytheism…. In sum, modern people, even Christians, do not believe the mythological structure that provides the logic for Paul’s statements about homosexuality in Romans 1. Heterosexist scholars alter Paul’s reference to a myth which most modern Christians do not even know, much less believe (that is, a myth about the beginnings of idolatry) and pretend that Paul refers to a myth that many modern Christians do believe, at least on some level (the myth about the Fall). Heterosexism can retain Paul’s condemnation of same-sex coupling only by eliding the supporting logic of that condemnation (1995:338-39).

The common ancient view that understood same-sex desires as representing simply a kind of spill-over from an excess of general sexual desire or lust might be compared to an understanding of left-handedness as resulting from an overuse of the right hand—as if persons tired of one thing decided to experiment with an alternative. Modern scientific studies of both left-handedness and homosexuality have shed great light on the pre-scientific character of such theories (Chandler Burr in Siker, Jeffrey, ed. 2007:26-31). .
(4) Four pejorative “changes” and the recommended transformation. As Jewett emphasizes, Paul’s triple references to the human acts of “ex/change” in 1:23, 25 and 26 (plus “leaving” in 27), followed by the triple affirmation that “God gave them up” (1:24, 26, 28) is fundamental to the structure of 1:19-32. In fact, Paul refers twice to an ancient “ex/change” as a human decision: (1-2) the true God for idols (1:23, 25); then again twice to changes resulting from divine abandonment to sexual uncleanness: (3) “their females” exchanged natural procreative sex for non-procreative heterosexual anal intercourse (26); (4) then the males, “leaving” the natural use of women, began to practice anal intercourse with other males (27). Jewett (2007:173) and Gagnon (2001:251, 253) conclude that Paul implies that any such male ‘leaving” of female partners is to be condemned absolutely as a sin comparable to idolatry (a conclusion promoted by the NIV translation “abandoned”; cf. NRSV more literally, almost casually: “leaving”). Thus both CHANGES in sexual behavior (1:26b, 27) may appear just as negative as changing the true God for idols (1:23, 25). However, since Paul is the great theologian of change, he later refers to change as constituting the positive essence of sanctification: “Be transformed….” (Rom 12:1-2); see 2 Cor 3:18; Hanks 2010:148). Both Jewett (2007:733) and Gagnon (2011:442) fail to relate texts such as Rom 12:1-2 to the changes in 1:18-32. Moreover, against their equating the changes in sexual practices as a sin comparable to the ancient option for idolatry we should note:

1. The literary genre of Rom 1:18-32 includes a highly rhetorical “Decline of Civilization” narrative (with its tendency to the hyperbole of prophetic denunciation), not a sober positive exposition of behaviour norms for the new communities, such as Paul later gives us in Romans (13:8-14).

2. Paul’s purpose in the four-fold repetition of vocabulary for change/leaving in the rhetoric of 1:23-27 is not to establish ethical absolutes, but rather to entrap the reader who boasts of his moral superiority and condemns others (2:1). Thus the reader who leaps to the conclusion that 1:26-27 implies a universal absolute condemnation of all homoerotic activity only lands the more quickly in the rhetorical trap Paul prepared for arrogant judges who condemn others (2:1-16).

3. The ancient change from monotheism to idolatry (23, 25) was a human decision, whereas the change to unclean sexual desires/lusts resulted from God’s abandonment of idolaters (God “gave them over,” 1:24, 26, 28), so unclean sexual desires/lusts were not the cause of God’s wrath (1:18), but its consequence.

4. Paul refers first to females (1:26; see below), but specifies only a change from natural/procreative sex to unnatural/non-procreative sex—with no indication of any exchange of male partners for female.

5. Paul emphasizes (three times) the shameful unclean desire/lust in 24, 26-27, but only in 1:26 does he specify the females’ recourse to “unnatural” (non-procreative) sex and only once (in 1:27) does he specify homoeroticism, the males leaving of female for male sex partners.

6. Even in 1:27, where Paul describes idolatrous males in antiquity (generally? all?) as “leaving” the “natural” (procreative) use of females, he again first emphasizes strong desire (“burned with desire/lust”), not the homoerotic “males among males” element.”

7. 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 personal sanctification (12:1-2) and the ultimate goal of God’s cosmic purpose (8:18-25). From Paul’s rhetoric against “change,” we might expect that he insist on “Jesus Christ…the same, yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8). However, the Apostle’s rhetoric on “changes” appears to be the fourth element in Rom 1 in which he later radically deconstructs an element that at first appeared to be purely negative. When he begins to provide positive instruction for Christian praxis, radical change is primary and fundamental “be ye transformed [radically changed!] by the renewing of the mind” (12:2; cf. the “reprobate mind” in 1:28). So Paul actually is the great Theologian of Change, who sought the continual transformation of Christian minds and praxis (Romans 12:1-2) and hoped for a total renovation of the cosmos (Rom 8:18-25; 2 Cor 5:17).

The changes denounced in Romans 1:23-27, however, were changes that dishonor God (1:23, 25) and harm the neighbour (13:8-10). Paul later indicates the desired transformation and renewal, affecting both mind and body, in terms of the corporate life of the tenement and house churches (12:3-16), their relations with oppressors and government authorities (12:14-13:7), and including sexual relations that reflect not lust but love (13:8-14). In the latter case, Paul does not require establishment of universal heterosexuality, but commands avoiding adultery (13:9), and other “excesses” (aselgeia) and assorted lusts (“beds” koiptais…”covetings” epithumias) that harm the neighbour (13:13-14). Far from an “anything goes” postmodern relativism, Paul’s norms for Christian sexual behaviour are quite demanding: “make no provision for the flesh to fulfil its
covetous lusts” (13:14). However, unlike traditional heterosexist Christian ethics, Paul’s norms are just and do not require more of persons with a homosexual orientation than they do of heterosexuals (Jewett 2007:160 and notes 114, 116; Mk 9:2-13; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17; Phlp 3:21; 1 Cor 15:51-52). In light of the later affirmation of positive change, we can see that Paul’s four negative references to change (in Rom 1:23, 25, 26-27) involved exchanging the true God for idols (1:23, 25) and changing procreative sexual relations for anal sex expressions of desire/lust (1:26-27)—often destructive behaviors that could damage Christian communities (13:8-13).

Amongst his opponents and fellow Jews (mainly married, like those he would soon face again in Jerusalem, with almost fatal consequences) Paul’s law-free Gentile mission would have created suspicion about his manhood and that of his mainly unmarried co-workers (Hanks 2007b; Leif E. Vaage, 2009; cf. the evidence from 1-2 Corinthians presented by Jennifer Larson 2004:85-97; also Jennifer Glancy 2004:99-135). Hence, in Romans 1:24-27 Paul first echoes elements from the traditional patriarchal Jewish propaganda line against Greco-Roman culture: (1) changing from worshipping the one true God, idolatrous humanity was given over to (2) sexual acts that were (a) unclean, (b) passionate/covetous/lustful, (c) shameful and (d) against nature. Probably Paul had assimilated these latter four elements (a, b, c, d) from his youth in what today we would call internalized homophobia. Wisdom of Solomon similarly saw idolatry producing pormeia generally and only later proceeded to specify “alteration of generation” (see Countryman 2007:62): “For the intention to make idols is the beginning of sexual immorality, and their invention is the corruption of life” (Wis. 14:12; cf. 14:24-27; Sib. Or. 3:8-44; T. Jos 4:5-6).

Paul’s approach would have reassured potential allies in the Roman churches that not all rumors arriving from Jerusalem were true (“gossips,” Rom 1:29; 3:8). However, once he had echoed the party line, he ventilates his long repressed anger and springs a trap on hypocritical judgmental readers, showing that those who condemned common pagan idolatry and unclean sexual behavior were even more guilty than those (mainly Gentiles) who applauded it (1:32; 2:1-29). Then in succeeding chapters, Paul expounds his inclusive gospel, with a view to his Spanish mission and deconstructs the four ambiguous elements in his trap-baiting rhetoric (1:18-32) while reinforcing as normative the fifth negative element (“desires/lusts/covetous passions).

Rom 1:24-27 thus contains five ambiguous but usually pejorative (negative-sounding) elements:

1. “changed” (idolatry, 1:23, 25; sexual practices, 26b, 27),
2. “uncleanness” (1:24)
3. dishonourable/shameful (1:24, 26a, 27),
4. unnatural (1:26b, 27),
5. “desires/lusts/covetous passions” (1:24, 26a, 27→ reinforced in13:8-10).

3-6 Romans 1:26: heterosexual or female same-sex? (lesbians?)

“Therefore God gave them up to dishonorable passions, for even their females have changed the natural use (chresin) for that against nature.”

as modern readers we tend to prejudice our interpretation of Rom 1:26-27 by approaching the text anachronistically with our modern construct of sexual orientations (contrasting male and female homosexuality), forgetting that ancient readers thought almost exclusively in terms of sexual acts (procreative, anal, oral, etc);

very few ancient texts refer to lesbians (only 18 out of the 447 cited in Hubbard 2007; see Leviticus);

only five texts reflect observation of stable same-sex preferences (Hultgren 2011:101, 619);

the ancient sources commonly compare male love for women with male love for boys (pederasty), not male homosexuality and lesbian relations. According to Hubbard, only four texts out of 447 link male preferences for males with female preferences for females (2003:69, 190, 261, 518) and evangelical Thomas Schmidt, recognizing only two, admitted: “Ancient authors did not, as a rule, connect male and female same-sex relations; 1995:81 and 192, note 52);

our modern obsession with (male) “homosexuality” prompts us to leapfrog to the male-male reference in Rom 1:27 but then read backwards to impose the same meaning on the previous female reference in 1:26. However, for Paul’s original readers, following Paul’s order, the female’s partner obviously would have been male, so the apostle in 1:27 then must specify that the males abandoned the natural partner for an unnatural one (Miller 1995:2). Since the ancient reader first would have interpreted 1:26 with no clue regarding the following male reference in 1:27, 1:26 most naturally would have been understood to refer to women offering themselves simply for “unnatural” (non-procreative) sexual acts with other males. The “similarity” that links 1:26-27 (“similarly/likewise”) would thus refer to the similar “unclean” acts of anal sex (females with males // males with males; see below Loader’s clarification). Most recent authors recognize that Paul does not make use of our modern concept of homosexual orientation and that anal sex acts are implied 1:27, but inexplicably they then fail to see how coherently anal sex acts would link 1:26 and 1:27 and thus anachronistically insist that the link must be “homosexuals” in same-sex acts.

According to Loader (2010:18) Bernadette Brooten shows that female-female sex was known and almost universally condemned as abhorrent: “Contrary to earlier claims, Brooten has shown through her extensive survey of Graeco-Roman and Jewish literature, as well as magical, astrological and medical texts, that the phenomenon of female-female sexual relations was known and almost universally condemned as abhorrent” (Brooten 1996 passim). However, we might respond: “Known,” yes, but largely ignored! (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; Rev 22:15; cf the attempt to rape angels in Gen 19 and Jude 7). Hence “universally condemned” but only by the very few sources referring to females (see Hubbard’s citations above).

Jewett, Hultgren and Loader recognize that Rom 1:26 only specifies females who had changed the “natural use” of a sex partner for a use “beyond/against nature” (para plusin), and that Paul does not indicate that this use involves another female. However, though recognizing that 1:26 does not refer explicitly to lesbians nor to homoeroticism, Jewett insists that a reference to lesbianism is clearly implied (176, note 127, following Bernadette Brooten 1996:248-53, note 99 and her arguments below against James Miller’s 1995 article). Moreover, since pederasty was not associated with lesbians, Jewett proceeds to reject Robin Scroggs’ conclusion that Paul targets only pederasty (177). Miller and Hultgren (2011:618) accept Scroggs’ emphasis on pederasty as correct, but not as an absolute limitation; similarly Craig Keener 2009:37 and note 91).

Brooten’s argument on the linguistic usage of 1:26: “against nature.” Like many, Stephen Moore accepted Brooten’s argument that Romans 1:26 must refer to female homoeroticism: “As for the women’s unnatural intercourse being anal or oral sex with men, explicit castigations of either activity as being contrary to nature are lacking in Greco-Roman sources (even including Jewish sources, whereas sexual relations between women are denounced as unnatural by an impressive array of authors over a long span of time....” (2001:143-144; citing Brooten, 1996:241-53; similarly Loader 2010:18-19). However, Brooten’s (1-7) and Moore’s twelve references (1-7 + 8-12) span a period of more than 800 years with only four even roughly contemporaneous with Paul, two of whom were elite Latin authors Only one (Pseudo-Phocylides) was Jewish and the only other who wrote in Greek was the astrologist, Dorotheos. None represented Paul’s own peculiar Hellenistic-Jewish-Christian cultural-linguistic mix.
That Paul in Romans 1:26 should provide us with our only example of male-female anal sex described with the phrase “against nature” may be of interest to linguists, but hardly significant exegetically or for establishing Paul’s meaning. For centuries (since Plato’s Laws) Greco-Roman authors commonly denounced as “against nature” all sexual relations that were non-procreative. Only penis in vagina sex for procreation was categorized as “natural” (Ward 1997:263-84; Kuefler 2001:383, note 55; Swancutt 2003:196, 209-10, note 36; Hanks 2006:591-593). Hence, were we to interrogate the seven authors cited by Brooten (or Stephen Moore’s dozen) whether male-female anal/oral sex is “against nature,” their answer would be an unqualified “obviously!” (It would not be a question to debate, just a dumb question). Thus Diana Swancutt says of Brooten’s case: “Her main argument, that ‘ancient sources depict sexual relations between women as unnatural’ (250) works only if ancient sources depicted only sexual relations between women as unnatural. But the bottom line is that they do not (and when they do discuss same-sex intercourse, it is the psychic and/or physical manliness of one of the women that is deemed unnatural” (2003:209, note 36). Paul’s description of male-female anal sex as “against nature” requires no more explanation than Philo’s unparalleled reference to relations during female menstrual periods as para physin (see Brooten’s citation from Paul’s Jewish contemporary, 247).

Significantly for evangelicals, already in lectures taped in the 1960’s, Francis Schaeffer recognized that Romans 1:26 “does not speak of homosexuality” (1998:42-43). A survey of both exegetical and historical evidence thus leads us to conclude that the New Testament, just like the Hebrew Bible and the Koran, contains no mention nor prohibition of sexual relations between women (“lesbians”). Furthermore, although traditional apologists tend to forget that women exist and that “homosexuals” include lesbians, once we properly interpret Romans 1:26, it becomes clear that the Bible nowhere condemns “homosexuals”: all other relevant texts specify males (see list above) and the condemnations have in view a specific male sexual act (anal sex, in contexts indicating idolatry and/or abuse/exploitation/oppression/violence)—not a person’s sexual orientation.


Following Simon Jan Ridderbos (1963), Kuefler concludes that the females in 1:26 were engaged in cultic prostitution (a possibility Jewett, Hultgren and Loader do not consider) and critiques Brooten for saying “incorrectly that the Roman-period sources on homoeroticism do not focus on cult prostitution” (2001:383 note 55; Hanks 2006:594). Against several recent scholarly denials, Kuefler argues that the cultic prostitution and male cultic prostitutes (qadesh/qedishim, “holy ones”; kelebh/im, “dogs”) referred to in biblical texts really existed and were not just the literary invention of late biblical authors (2001:255-56, 381, notes 44-50; see “holy ones” in Deut 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 2:47; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14). He concludes that various biblical texts reflect common elements of cultic prostitution related to fertility cults: (1) castration of priests (Deut 23:1); (2) sexual penetration of males (Lev 18:22; 20:13); (3) transvestism (Deut 22:5); and (4) the prohibition of wearing mixed cloth of linen and wool, the type worn by cultic prostitutes (Deut 22:11; Lev 19:19). This best explains Paul’s reference to idolatry (1:25) coming between the verses referring to sexuality (1:24...26-27).

Loader (2010:18-19) accepts Broothen’s faulty argument regarding the linguistic usage of “against nature”, but somewhat misinterprets attempted refutations: “The interpretation of 1:26 as reflecting concern with procreation...faces problems” since Paul elsewhere was singularly unconcerned about procreation (2010:18-19). However, the contention is not that Rom 1:26 reflects Paul’s concern with procreation, but that his reference to “their females” resorting to anal sex to avoid procreation simply reflects the common motivation of those females, which in turn forms part of his rhetorical trap to catch judgmental readers.

3.7 Rom 1:27 on male-male anal sex (→ Hanks 2011:76-114; 2006:582-605)

As Loader points out regarding the first word in 1:27, which links the male-male anal sex to “their females” in 1:26, “Homoios...can simply mean ‘likewise’ or ‘similarly’, [and] ensures that the female and male activities...
are identified as similar” (19). He thus corrects the common translation “Likewise” or “In the same way” (NIV), aimed at equating the same-sex male acts with the purported same-sex female acts of 1:26. However, even should we follow the NIV, the male-male anal sex of 1:27 may be viewed as analogous to heterosexual anal sex (unnatural, avoiding procreation) in 1:26. Loader also does well to point out that the reference to males, burning in desire “for one another” (1:27), suggests “mutuality rather than exploitation and so apparently envisage also adult-adult sexual relations of mutual consent” (23, citing Brooten 1996:361). However, he acknowledges that, as Jewett emphasized, Paul’s formulations also could “include abusive sex, such as exploitation of male slaves, which…Paul may have in mind in relation to Rome” (23), where almost all the names of tenement church members greeted in Rom 16 are slave names.

In addition to the mutual consent (“one another”) and common slave name factors, Loader summarizes the long-standing debate over Robin Scroggs’ argument (1983; Hanks 2006:593-94) that sexual exploitation by pederasts is Paul’s real target in Romans 1:26-27, since they are the predominant concern in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman writers (Loader 22-23). Loader correctly concludes that “research since Scroggs has concluded that Paul would have more in mind than just pederasty in Romans 1” (23). He points out (citing Hanks 2006:593) that if we interpret Rom 1:26 as referring to unnatural, non-procreative heterosexual acts (anal sex), one of the main arguments against Scroggs is removed (the fact that women were seldom denounced for pederasty). Moreover, if we accept Countryman’s bracketing of Rom 1:24-27 as referring to sexual acts that are “unclean” but not necessarily sinful, this would be incompatible with Scroggs. And if we recall that Paul is here incorporating a Decline of Civilization narrative as part of his rhetorical trap for judgmental readers, we may hesitate to emphasize ambiguous verbal details, which were rhetorically formulated to lure readers into his trap, not to provide us with a sociologically precise map of Paul’s view of homoerotic behavior in the empire—much less universal sexual ethics to provide precise guidance for his churches (see Rom 13:8-14; 1 Cor 5-7).

Although ignored in Hultgren’s recent commentary (2011), Loader (2010:19-20) approvingly summarizes Robert Jewett’s original interpretation of Rom 1:27: “Jewett draws attention to the account in Hippocrates of the painful aspect of anal intercourse, suggesting that Paul is making specific reference to this effect. Thus he sees ‘shame’ here, as often, referring to a man’s penis, ‘working up’ to working up an erection, the ‘reward/payback’ to the soreness both of the anus and of the penis, and behind the words ‘which was inevitable/necessary’ [dei] he sees a reference to tightness or constrictedness and its effects. Accordingly, he translates: ‘males who work up their shameful member in [other] males, and receive back for their deception [error] the recompense that is tightness (έdei) in themselves’ (summarizing Jewett 2007:179-80). I fail to see any basis in Jewett for attributing the tightness to the penis of the penetrator as well as the anus of the penetrated; Jewett also exempts the women of 1:26 from suffering the tightness, since in 1:27 the participles “working up” and “receiving back” are connected syntactically with “males”; 2007:180).

After his approving summary of Jewett’s proposals, Loader lists the alternative proposals and concludes only that “There remain a number of other unresolved issues” (2011:20); see Note. “Error” (planes) below. In my review of Jewett 2007 at the Society of Biblical Literature (Hanks 2007) I concluded:

Jewett’s translation of 1:27 contains three controversial elements:

And likewise also the males, after they abandoned the natural use (chresin) with females, were inflamed (exekάuthesan) with their lust (ορέκσει) for one another, males who work up (κατεργαδύμενοι) their shameful member (aschemosúnen) in [other] males, and receive back for their deception (plane, error) the recompense that is tightness (έdei) in themselves.

Quite possible is Jewett’ understanding that the males “work up (κατεργαδύμενοι) their shameful member (aschemosúnen) in [other] males” [specifying anal sex]; highly improbable, however, is his interpretation that for their “error” (plane) of sexual perversion the passive receptive males receive back the recompense of “tightness [έdei, from the verb dei] in themselves.”

- Jewett points out that aschemosúne may refer either to a “shameful deed” or be a euphemism for sexual organs and concludes that in this case his translation “shameful member” is supported by the singular form of aschemosúne that follows the plurals of “males in males” (2006:179; see “indecent acts,” NIV). Although he

- For katergadzomai Jewett can cite Hippocrates in support of an “explicit sexual sense of ’work up for use’ or produce juices ‘in the body’ (2006:179), but other Pauline and New Testament uses commonly are general and positive and provide no support for any specialized medical sexual sense (BDAG 2000:531).

- Jewett then concludes that “In the context of anal intercourse, the verb dei has a special sense of ‘tighten’” and again cites Hippocrates in support of the translation “tightness” or “soreness” (2006:179 and note 156), interpreting the soreness as the “recompense” that [passive] homosexual males purportedly receive. Neither other commentaries nor BDAG 2000 provides any support for Jewett’s recourse to Hippocrates and the translation “tightness” (2000:213-214). Much more convincing is the conclusion of Diana Swancutt that in Rom 1:27 the requital Paul refers to is what Philo of Alexandria (Paul’s Jewish contemporary) called “the disease of effemination” which commonly was thought to result in the case of males who submitted to anal penetration (2003:193-233; 2004:56; Hanks 2006:596-97). Although Jewett refers to the context of Hippocrates’ reference to “tightness” as being that of “anal intercourse” (2006:179), he then contradictorily concludes that “Paul’s language served to remove any vestige of decency, honor, or friendship from same-sex relations [generally]!”. Neither distinguishing pederasty from relationships between adult, consenting males, nor distinguishing between active and passive partners as Roman culture was inclined to do, Paul simply follows the line of his Jewish cultural tradition by construing the entire realm of homosexual relations [not just male-male anal sex!] as evidence that divine wrath was active therein” (179). Undoubtedly Jewett is correct that we should take into account Paul’s Jewish cultural tradition, which limited its concern to male-male anal intercourse (Lev 18:22; 20:13) and rarely referred to lesbian relations. But why limit the punishment to the passive [male] partner? [And why exclude the women of 1:26 from the “payback”?] And why deny that the Apostle who penned Rom 12:1-2 may at times transcend both his Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural tradition, rather than being so totally conformed to “the world”? (cf Hanks 2000:91; 2006:594-95).

Note. “Error” (planes), wandering from the path of truth (1:27e; cf. “planet,” a wandering body). Most have understood the “error” (planes) in 1:27b to refer to the idolatry of 1:19-23, 25 and the “recompense/payback” to be the sexual uncleanness of 1:24-27. Thus, William Countryman concluded that we should “take the ‘error’ as idolatry and the ‘recompense’ as the [sexual] uncleanness of Gentile culture” (1988:115). Similarly, Robert Gagnon translates: “receiving in themselves the payback which was necessitated by their straying (from the truth about God),” explaining that “the ‘straying’ or ‘error’ (plane) is that of not acknowledging the true God (i.e., idolatry),” which he calls “the consensus view” (2001:260 and note 19; see Calvin, Hodge, Godet, Murray, Cranfield 126-27, Wilckens, Dunn 165, Countryman 115-16, Schmidt 83-84, Nissinen 109, Byrne 1996:77, Helminiak 2000:98-99; Schreiner 1998:97; TDNT). As Gagnon indicates, both Countryman and Schmidt say “that Paul consistently used plane …of wrong belief rather than wrong conduct” (2001:260 note 19). BDAG also backs this up, defining plane in Rom 1:27 as “an erroneous view of God, as exhibited in polytheism, resulting in moral degradation” (2000:822, citing Wisdom12:24). Regarding 1:25 Jewett emphasizes the use of the article “the lie” to refer to the human exchange of the truth of God for idolatry, “which involves the fundamental thrust of humans to replace God with themselves….to define evil and good for themselves” (2007:170, citing Gen 3:5 and referring emperor veneration in Roman religion.

Jewett, however, opposes the interpretation (“error” = idolatry) and prefers to interpret plane in 1:27e as the error of sexual misconduct (1:24, 26-27a). Others similarly designate the “error” to be excessive passion or homosexual activity (Schmithals, Fredrickson 215-217, Moo 116, Fitzmyer 288, Wright 434, Talbert 68, Swancutt 2003:212) while Brooten leaves the question open (1996:257-58). Much less likely, however, is Jewett’s interpretation that for their “error” (plane) of sexual perversion the passive receptive males receive in themselves the payback, recompense, or penalty of anal “tightness (dei, from the verb dei), the soreness suffered as a result of being anally penetrated” (1:27b; 2007:180). Jewett recognizes that the antecedents in 1:27 refer the punishment only to the passive males (2007:180), even though the purportedly “lesbian” behaviour of 1:26 was supposed to be the worst offense. Jewett thus implicitly limits the sexual misconduct to male-male anal sex but with the penalty suffered only by the penetrated male! Preferable to Jewett’s definition of the punishment as anal “tightness/soreness” would be the conclusion of Diana Swancutt that in Rom 1:27 the
requital Paul refers to is what Philo of Alexandria (Paul’s Jewish contemporary) called “the disease of effeminacy,” commonly thought to result in the case of males who submitted to anal penetration (2003:200-201; 2004:56; 2007:30; Hanks 2006:596-98). With Jewett’s interpretation we can discern a certain coherent development in 1:27: leaving (“abandoned”) → lusting → anal penetration → punishment. However, as Countryman points out, if we depart from the meaning of plane as a reference to idolatry we are left with a mysterious “recompense/ payback/requital” that is undesignated in the context, while the sexual uncleanness is clearly indicated in 1:24, 26-27 as God’s punishment for idolatry. Loader lists the alternative interpretations (20), but (like Brooten) leaves the identification of the “error” and the “payback” an unresolved issue.

3-8 Paul as Jewish missionary, seeking to involve Roman churches in his mission to Spain. “I view the argument of this letter as an attempt to persuade Roman house and tenement churches to support the Spanish mission” (Jewett 2007:3). Marcella Althaus-Reid comments, “Perhaps Queer people [including Paul!] receive a special sense of divine vocation or a wanderlust that makes of them uninstitutionalised, restless nomads” (2003:49). Loader (12) also recognizes Paul’s missionary purpose in Romans: “Broadly speaking Paul is writing Romans because he plans to visit and them and enlist their support for his future plan of a mission to Spain (15:22-29).” However, elsewhere he seems to forget about Paul’s rhetorical trap and gives priority to traditional Justification Theory (Campbell), holding that the purpose of Romans 1-4 is to prove that “all have sinned” (3:9, 21; Loader 12-13, citing John Nolland 2000). This in turn implies that Paul’s purpose in 1:18-32 involves making clear the sinfulness of same-sex relations and that ideological purpose imposes itself over resistant exegetical data (“unclean….unnatural…dishonorable…changes”). If, however, Paul’s basic purpose in Romans is missional, then texts like 3:9 and 21 mainly have in view the arrogant, inhospitable members of Roman house and tenement churches whom he will exhort to solidarity (14:1-15:13).

In 1:8-15 Paul says only that he would visit the (divided) Roman domestic churches to preach his inclusive Gospel (of reconciliation, 5:6-8; and welcome, 15:1-13); but despite his debt to “remaining nations” (1:13) and “barbarians” (1:14), the Apostle does not reveal his intention to use the Roman churches to launch his proposed mission to Spain until the end (15:14-33). “The stunning feature of Paul’s thesis [1:16-17]…is its contention that preaching the gospel to establish faith communities, rather than force of arms or apocalyptic military miracles, is the means by which such righteousness [liberating justice] is restored….The global offensive in behalf of divine righteousness [liberating justice] envisioned by Romans is missional and persuasive rather than martial and coercive” (Jewett 2007:146, 143). James Dunn has challenged Jewett’s emphasis on the mission purpose of Romans, arguing that the absence of Jewish communities (with their Gentile “God-fearers”) and ignorance of the Greek language in Spain would have made expectations of support from the Roman tenement churches unrealistic (2007). Dunn, however, forgets that slaves and former slaves from Spain in such churches may have represented the cultures, known the languages (especially Latin?) and maintained useful contacts with family and friends in their former homeland (see the key role of the Israelite slave girl in Naaman’s healing, 2 Kings 5:2-3; see now especially Allan Chapple, 2011:.193-212).

Obviously, arrogant ethnocentric prejudice against those “barbarians” and “foolish” (1:14) in Spain would be a major obstacle to any effort to get support in Rome for Paul’s mission project, and it is this imperial prejudice that the laying (1:18-32) and first springing (2:1-29) of his rhetorical trap devastatingly addresses. The ancient foolish pagan option for idolatry (1:18-23, 25) and God’s resulting abandonment of them to social injustices (1:28-32) and to their sexual uncleanness (1:24-27) also perfectly describe the barbarians in Spain as seen from Rome. The sting operation in 2:1-29 drives home the point: anyone presuming to condemn those barbarians in Spain had best look first in the mirror. Thus to understand Paul’s purpose in 1:16–2:29 we must recall (1) the nature of the house churches as consisting largely of the poor (slaves and freed persons), sexual minorities, led mainly by women (Rom 16), (2) their divisions between the strong, mainly gentiles, and weak, mainly Jews (14:1-15:13) and (3) the Apostle’s effort to involve these feuding churches in launching his mission to Spain (15:14-33) and so usher in Jesus’ return and earthly rule (13:11-12). The complex situation Paul addressed resulted in rhetoric in 1:16–2:29 that confuses modern readers, unaware of the diversity of his listeners, Paul’s multiple aims and his baiting of his rhetorical trap (1:18-32) with intentionally ambiguous language.

Jewett says: “Although many commentators… assume that Paul is only targeting Gentiles in this passage [1:18-23], the inclusive reference in Rom 1:18 to ‘all impiety and unrighteousness [= injustice/oppression] of humans’ eliminates this loophole…. The cross reveals a fundamental distortion of honor-shame systems in
which a universal desire for superior status ends up in a hostile assault on God” (2007:158; 196). As for the expression “whomever you are who pass judgment,” (2:1) Jewett adds: “In various locations….Paul maintains the same principle: ‘Because judging is God’s right alone human judging is forbidden.’ Paul’s formulation depicts a censorious bigot who condemns everybody beyond himself.

Swancutt (2004:45), developing the conclusions of Stanley Stowers (1994), emphasizes the importance of not breaking our reading of Rom 1:18-32 at the end of Chapter 1 but continuing through 2:1-16, since this section first springs the rhetorical trap with “a sweeping sting operation” (so even Gagnon 2001:278) and constitutes the immediate goal of the rhetoric in 1:18-32. Paul’s purpose in 1:18-32 is thus not to persuade his audience that homoeroticism is a terrible sin, nor even to convince them that “all have sinned” (3:23; both Jews and Greeks, 3:9). Rather Paul’s references to the “uncleanness” (1:24) of females avoiding procreation by anal sex (1:26) and males similarly practicing anal sex with one another (1:27) is held out as a kind of bait to listener/reader prejudices in order to then convict them of the sin of judgmental hypocrisy like that of the pretentious censorious bigot in the diatribe of 2:1-16.

Were clear sexual ethics (condemning all same-sex acts) the goal in 1:24-27, why is Paul so vague about the “unnatural use” by “their females” in 1:26, especially if he really intends to invent a new prohibition against lesbianism (notably absent in the Hebrew Bible and from 1 Cor 6:9 in his reference to “bed-males”)? And if Paul intended to create a new law against lesbianism to add to Moses’ 613, why was the language so ambiguous that no one interpreted it this way for 350 years (centuries when most Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria were fluent in Greek)—until John Chrysostom finally made things “clear” around 400 AD? (But not to Augustine!) And for the males of 1:27, would Paul only insist that covetous sexual lust and exploitation be avoided and love for neighbor be the norm (13:8-13)? Or does he really intend listeners to deduce a clear code of sexual ethics from his rhetorical “Decline of Civilization” narrative in 1:18-32? Today we still face an ever-growing multiplication of possibly intended “codes” arguing that 1:27 targets (1) only “perversion”—homosexual acts by heterosexual males—(2) or paederaphilia, (3) or sexual abuse and exploitation of slaves, (4) or participation in idolatrous cult prostitution. This suggests that Paul’s purpose in 1:24-27 was not to provide clear sexual behavioral norms (“ethics”), since when this is his aim the ambiguity is reduced (13:8-13), not maximized. And although 1:26-27 might suggest that Paul promoted only “natural” (procreational) sex, elsewhere Paul is singularly uninterested in procreation (1 Cor 7; 1 Thes 4:3-8; see similarly Jesus’ praxis and his teaching regarding eunuchs (Mat 19:12). Rather, Paul’s two references to “natural” (procreational) sex (Rom 1:26-27) remind us that in 1:18-32 he seeks to lure into his trap patriarchal readers obsessed with procreating heirs.

Chapple, Allan (2011). “Why Spain? Paul and His Mission Plans.” Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters 1.2, 193-212. Chapple concludes that Paul’s mission project to reach Spain was especially influenced by the Servant’s commission to be a light to the nations, bringing salvation to the “end of the earth” (Isa 49:6): “In practice, this meant a mission to Spain (Rom 15:24, 28), the western limit of the oikoumene, because it seems that the southern and eastern limits were in the process of being reached by others” (212).

3.9 Loader’s Conclusion (120) on Romans 1:24, 26-27 summarizes well his interpretation 1 (11-29):
1 “We began with same-sex relations, where Paul appears to use them like other Jews of the time, as a particularly crass instance of what happens when people turn away from the true God:
2 for they also lose touch with their own reality and engage in unnatural sex.
3 Also like other Jews Paul bases this judgment on what the biblical law prohibits
4 but also on a range of supporting arguments, which include understanding what is natural in terms of how God created things,
5 strong disapproval of excessive sexual passion,
6 and the shamefulfulness of men taking women’s roles and women usurping men’s.
7 About the only argument not taken up is that such intercourse does not produce offspring.
8 In addition Paul’s descriptions do not focus on the abuse that often occurred in such relations (though not more than in heterosexual ones).
9 Paul’s assessment, like the assessment reflected in the prohibitions which he never quotes, rest on a combination of these prior assumptions, rather than on any single one“.
3.10 My qualifications of Loader’s conclusions

1 No acknowledgment of Paul’s use of Decline of Civilization narrative referring to invention of idolatry by humanity’s original ancestors (not to be equated with Adam’s “fall” in Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12-21). “crass” may be unclean, not sinful
2 women? [as created beings—with a sexual orientation?]
3 Only male-male anal sex: in context of idolatry and need for demographic expansion (Lev 18; 20)
4 Fails to trace deconstruction of “un/natural” in Romans, especially God’s acts against nature in 11:24
5 or just unclean strong desire?
6 or preaching the Good News of a crucified messiah?
7 as elsewhere Paul, like Jesus, is indifferent or even hostile to patriarchal “family values”
8 God’s wrath directed against all human oppression (1:18, 28-32)
9 Prohibitions are not cited because his aim is to entrap, not to make an assessment or prohibit or create a sexual ethics

My Conclusion. Thus, although frequently disagreeing, I have found Loader’s chapter the most helpful overview of the many controversial questions remaining regarding the interpretation of Romans 1:18-2:29 and related texts. As is almost universal in modern authors he frequently poses the questions using Greek philosophical categories (moral, ethical vs. ritual/cultic) but at one point at least recognizes that Paul introduces such categories (“un/natural”) that the Hebrew Bible and Jesus had avoided. Unquestionably Robert Gagnon’s works provide an almost encyclopedic resource for the debate, but Loader’s contribution would have been even greater had he more aggressively challenged the way Gagnon’s ideology drives and distorts his exegesis. As so often, academic writers, secure in their own hermeneutical castle, “give away the store” on exegetical questions (Rom 1:26 misinterpreted as referring to lesbians; “unnatural” as implying sinful) and then wonder that political decisions by laity (who find Biblical hermeneutics too complicated to tackle) are more determined by what “The Bible says.” (open to correction of translations by exegesis).


Loader (2010) does not include in his bibliography and was not able to cite Douglas Campbell’s magnus opus on Romans (2009). However, he does briefly interact with an earlier version of Campbell’s principal thesis that in Rom 1:18-32 Paul does not set forth his own viewpoint, but uses the common rhetorical device of prosopopoía [speech-in-character]: “In 1:18-32 Paul would be role-playing the hypocrite of 2:1,” as Loader explains and briefly tries to refute, citing John Nolland’s 2000 article that insisted Paul was serious in trying to establish that all have sinned (2010:12-13). Like Loader and Nolland, I reject the hypothesis of speech-in-character to explain Rom 1:18-32. Though acknowledging the strength and profundity of Campbell’s work, I find a simple recognition of Paul’s rhetorical trap in Rom 1:18-32 and later deconstruction of the four intentionally ambiguous elements more convincing than the resort to an unmarked citation of a false teacher. Campbell acknowledges that the “for/because” (1:18; gr. gar) connects 1:18 to the preceding context and the series of four “gar’s” carry the reader without pause from 1:16-18 (2009:340-41). Note also the contrast between “oppression” (1:18ab) and integral liberation and liberating justice of the just (1:16-17). (For details see above on the entrapment and Campbell’s argument, www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar/ingles/ingles.html, (Hanks 2007a/12, Appendix 5) and “Reviews”, “Campbell Excursus”).