Emeritus professor of New Testament at Murdoch university and member of the Uniting Church in Australia (a union of Methodist, Presbyterians and Congregationalists), 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 Kathy L. Gaca, 2003). His research was mainly conducted 2005-10 as Australian Research Council Professional fellow. I was glad to see that Loader includes in his bibliography and refers (in 2010 + 2012 18x) to my chapter on Romans (Hanks 2006) in the Queer Bible Commentary, a volume largely ignored by scholars who are not LGBTT. Loader has long advocated 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.) In his 2010 booklet Loader provided a wonderfully concise summary of most key debating points with endnotes referencing much of the most significant relevant bibliography. Back flap, 2012: “This is the fifth and final installment of William Loader’s authoritative, acclaimed series on attitudes toward sexuality in the ancient world….His other books on sexuality in early Judaism and Christianity are Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality; The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality; The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality; and Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality”

I have found Loader’s work the most helpful overview of the many controversial questions regarding the interpretation of Romans 1 and related biblical texts on sexuality. Perhaps the major weakness in both Loader’s recent volumes (2010; 2012) is the failure to change the question. Loader’s exegesis of the relevant texts on same-sex acts usually concludes that they are correctly interpreted by Robert Gagnon, whose two relevant books and website Loader cites 46 times in his chapter on same-sex acts (2010:7-34; similarly 2012:293-338, 36 references). Loader 2010 contains a respectable sprinkling of alternate voices (e.g. William Countryman, in his newer 2007 edition, 11 times) and Loader 2012 has encyclopedic references to similar alternative views (pp. 1-500, with a 40 pp. bibliography). Unquestionably Robert Gagnon’s works provide a valuable resource, but Loader’s contribution would have been even greater had he more aggressively challenged the way Gagnon’s ideology drives and distorts his exegesis. Rather than following writers like Gagnon in their desperate effort to find a text that condemns all same-sex acts as sinful, a more revealing question would be to ask whether and how heterosexist and homophobic presuppositions have distorted translations, exegesis and hermeneutics (including contemporary application).

Evidence that such is the case abounds throughout 2000+ years of mistranslation and misinterpretation of the relevant texts. The major popular example would be the imposition of the death penalty on “sodomites” throughout most of church history instead of recognizing that Genesis 19 and the 48 related biblical references to Sodom refer only to an attempted gang rape of two visiting angels, not to sexual love between consensual adults (as if Nathan’s condemnation of David’s adultery with Bathsheba were constituted a condemnation of the king’s “heterosexuality”). A prime scholarly example would be F.W. Danker’s recognition (2000:135) that versions based on earlier editions of the BDAG lexicon erred when they proposed the now widely accepted “translation” of Paul’s arsenokoitai as “homosexuals” (RSV 1946 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; when, whatever the preferred translation, the term indicates a male sexual act, not females, nor sexual orientations). By simply changing the question, we get a radically different view of the data surveyed. When we focus on the “problem” of the Jews, women, persons of color, or the poor, we arrive at quite distorted conclusions compared to when we change the question to study the problems of anti-semitism, sexism, racism, and the rich. Although Loader poses questions using Greek philosophical categories (“moral/ethical”), at one point he recognizes that Paul introduces such philosophical categories (“un/natural”) that the Hebrew Bible and Jesus had avoided.

A second weakness would be the tendency to impose an arbitrary “ethical” unity on the rich diversity of exegetical perspectives regarding sexual matters, which Loader’s work so abundantly documents. For instance, Loader writes: “The early Christian movement as it developed within Judaism was heavily influenced by
Jewish assumptions….Statements by Jesus appeared as the very opposite of loosening the demands of biblical law. They enhanced their strictness even further—such as on divorce and remarriage” (Loader 2010:64-65; 2012:3-4; similarly, Gagnon 2001:185-93). Methodologically, such statements may be questioned. Expressions such as “within Judaism” and “Jewish assumptions” encourage readers to forget the enormous diversity characteristic of both the “Judaisms” and “Christianities” of the period. Judaism is identified with the “demands of biblical law” rather than giving full weight to the Wisdom literature (Song of Solomon; Ecclesiastes, Job) and narratives (Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan; compare the levirate law in Deut 25 with the divergent narratives about Tamar and Ruth). Jesus advocates “strictness” on divorce to discourage marriage!

The supposed enhanced “strictness” on divorce can only be affirmed by ignoring the fact that no two biblical texts say the same thing (→ Mark, Appendix on Divorce). In a patriarchal tradition where both the dominant Greco-Roman cultures and the Judaisms emphasized marriage for procreation, the option of Jesus and Paul and their circles to prioritize remaining unmarried and avoiding procreation was anything but “conservative”! Would a conservative commend three types of eunuchs as paradigms of the new discipleship (Mat 19:12) or give prostitutes priority over religious leaders for entrance into God’s Dominion (Mat 21:31-32; → Hanks 2000a/2008)? Why draw “ethical” conclusions condemning prostitution, using Paul’s perplexing teaching on idolatrous foreign prostitutes in 2 Cor 6:14-16 (2012:222-26), rather than allow all the positive references to Rahab to have equal weight? Cf. diversity of teaching regarding eunuchs and widows (to remarry or not—1 Cor 7 vs. 1 Tim). And why allow a handful of negative “control texts” (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) to outweigh the strong positive narrative texts on Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Jesus and the Beloved Disciple? Rarely do I differ with Loader’s exegetical conclusions, but attention to the history of homophobia and heterosexism leads me to construct a quite different forest from so many lovely trees.

Both Loader and Gagnon include in their works ample documentation of the diversity characteristic of both the Biblical texts and their related cultures, but somehow, when it comes to drawing conclusions, ideology dictates that Judaism, Jesus and Paul be represented above all by Leviticus and Romans 1, not by Song of Solomon. This prejudice commonly is reflected in the elite male written sources cited, but one may suspect that the perspectives of ordinary (illiterate) folk, may better be reflected in Song of Songs. Hence the value of employing a more canonical theology in interpreting the familiar negative proof texts of Leviticus and Romans.

1 The seven “clobber” texts

1.1 Gen 19:1-29, Sodom (Loader 2010:10; 2012:28-30; Hanks 2011:6-25) The Sodom incident “depicts violent inhospitality through attempted male rape” (Loader 2010:10). Both Gen 19 and Judg 19 (the rape of the Levite’s concubine) are about “inhospitality expressed through sexual violence” (2012:29; Hanks 2011:6-25). Paul’s contemporary, Philo was the first to interpret Sodom’s sin not only as violent inhospitality but also more generally as 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 (2010:10). Similarly the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs argues that the people of Sodom departed from the order of nature established in creation, like the Watchers, the angels who descended to earth and had sex with women, procreating giants (10; Gen 6:1-4; see below on Jude 6-7 and Hanks 2011:56-75). In Matthew 10:14-15 // Luke 10:10-12 “Sodom’s inhospitality is the focus, not sex” (Loader 2010:33; cf. Gagnon 2003:73 [also, with reference to the Gospel source “Q,” Gagnon 2001:87]).

1.2-3 Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 (Hanks 2011:26-39; Loader 2012:22-27; 2010:8-10,28, citing Brokken 1996:89, 217 and Gagnon 2001:122; 2003:81). Since the study of Saul Olyan (1994/97), biblical scholars generally recognize that the two Levitical texts refer only to male-male anal sex acts (not other homoerotic expressions or sexual “orientations”—much less to women/lesbians or “homosexuals”; 2012:22-23). Loader, however (like Gagnon) thinks that a broader prohibition is implied. He points out that the texts “probably served a succession of functions, from [1] family rules for survival (procreation), to [2] community demarcation from surrounding cultures, possibly with a view to particular religious practices [idolatry?], to [3] outlawing behavior in which men were allegedly dishonored by acting like women, to [4] upholding a sense of order understood not least as divine creation” (2010:9; see 2012:25-27). 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” which he cites in detail: Pseudo-Phocylides, Philo and Josephus [roughly contemporary to Jesus and Paul] (2010:9-10). 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). Loader also cites Hanks QBC article (2006:595) “who argues: ‘the only sexual act prohibited in the Leviticus texts was male-male anal penetration, not other homoerotic expressions’” (23, note 43). However, I presented no argument but merely cited Saul Olyn (1994/97) and the scholarly consensus. Elsewhere I summarize the conclusions of Thomas Thurston (1990) and Jerome Walsh (2001) who argue that Leviticus targets especially the passive penetrated ([3] above; Hanks 2011:30-39; similarly Loader 2012:22-23, 26). Loader also cites my QBC chapter (2006:595) as follows: “Nothing in the text suggests concern with sexually transmitted diseases, so that the comment of Hanks, that ‘it simply prohibits male-male anal intercourse (without condoms)’ belongs rather to hermeneutical application than to history” (Loader 2012:26). However, the same fundamentalist interpreters who use the Leviticus texts to condemn all “homosexuals” (and even to promote a literal death penalty for all “sodomites”) also commonly claim to find much medical value in the laws for protecting Israel’s health—hence my reference to condoms. If scholars wish to dignify my intended humorous allusion as a hermeneutical application rather than exegesis, I have no problem, but health concerns bulk large in traditional commentators, both ancient and modern, even when they treat texts, which, taken in isolation, provide no basis.

Loader (2010:28b) prefaces his treatment of Romans 1:24, 26-27 commenting on the purported influence of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in Rom 1, 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 (2012:320). Ignoring the growing scholarly literature to the contrary, Loader excludes the narrative examples of Ruth and Naomi and of David and Jonathan, as well as → 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 (Gerd Theissen, (1983 German / 87; John Shelby Spong, 1991; Stephen D. Moore, 2001:133-172; Hanks 2007a/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 draws on Leviticus as a source of norms for his churches he is highly selective: see neighbor love from Lev 19:18 and the Ten Commandments cited in Rom 13:8-10 and Gal 5:14 (2012:232). 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) rather than with references to the unclean sexual practices of idolaters (1:24-27).

The other basis used to argue for Paul’s advocacy of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as providing universal ethical norms is the theory that that Paul himself coined from two words (male + bed in the LXX translation) the “male-bedders” (arsenokoitai) in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10. 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). When laying his trap the Apostle might well slip in allusions to Lev 18:22 and 20:13 (as in Rom 1:32; Loader 14, 28) to lure 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 universal ethical norms for his churches. And if the original Jewish author’s main intent in → Leviticus 18 and 20 was to maximize procreation (Jacob Milgrom, AB Leviticus 2000), 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. Even in 2012:20-22 Loader neglects the important work of David Stewart (2006; 2012) on the relationship between incest and same-sex acts in Leviticus 18 and 20, based on his doctoral studies and highly recommended by Jacob Milgrom (2000).

1.4 1 Timothy 1:9-11 (Loader 2010:32-33; 2012:332-34; Hanks 2000/08:172-73; 2011:40-55). As Loader makes clear in both works, 1 Tim’s deuteroepoline vice list refers to Moses’ Law, roughly following the Decalogue’s order (Deut 5:16-20), using its commandments as umbrella terms. Included are: “fornicators [pornois, male prostitutes], arsenokoitai [male-bedders], slave traders....” According to Loader (2010), 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-bedders (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].” In 2010 Loader expresses no preference for any of these alternatives but notes that our earliest post-paulline occurrences of arsenokoitai are not simply sexual but imply “some kind of violence” (33; changed to “exploitation,” which is more accurate, in 2012:333; Hanks 2011:40-55). Loader (2012:332, note 176) cites my comment on 1 Cor 6:9: “Paul’s vice list similarly is headed with the reference to oppression (adikia), implying that the only homoerotic acts condemned in the following list are those characterized by exploitation, injustice and violence (rape), all especially experienced by slaves” (QBC 2006:583; see also adikia in Rom 1:18ab, 29). Against the mistranslation “homosexuals” note instead of the two terms in 1 Cor 6:9 (“soft-males…male-bedders” [passive and active in anal sex?]), only arsenokoitai is used in 1 Tim 1:10. Loader concludes that, given Paul’s citation of the role of the law, “it is also plausible to assume that the prohibitions of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 inform his usage of the word” (2012:334), but he might then have pointed out that in Romans 13:8-10 the Law is to be filtered through the command to love, not harm, the neighbor and in 14:1-15:13 directed to upbuilding the community (2012:232).

1.5 1 Cor 6:9 (Loader 2010:29-32; 2012:167-69, 326-32; Hanks 2000/08:108, 172-73; 2010:175, 258-59). The link between slave traders and arsenokoitai (male-bedders) in 1 Tim 1:10 clarifies the more disputed interpretation of “male-bedders” (arsenokoitai) paired with “soft-males” (malakoi) in Paul’s earlier vice list in 1 Cor 6:9, where the two terms often are mistranslated as one: “homosexuals” (since the RSV NT, 1946). As Loader makes clear in 2012, (pace Gagnon), “It is certainly inappropriate to translate either word (malakoi or arsenokoitai) by the modern term ‘homosexual’, because the common understanding was that men engaging in such activity were just as likely also to be engaging in sex with women both licit and illicit” (332). However, since Paul heads this list with the term adikoi (unjust, violent oppressors) and our four earliest post-paulline 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” (2010:31-32; see Miller 2010:37). Loader thus gives priority to dubious etymology over usage and context (2012:329-30). 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” (2010:32; see 29-32 + 19 endnotes, including Gagnon n. 111, who even argues that the reference to male-male anal sex in 1 Cor 6:9 implies inclusion of females in lesbian non-anal sex!).

1.6 Jude 7; cf. 2 Peter 2:6 (Loader 2010:33, 79; 2012:335-36; Hanks 2000/08:243-45; 2010:348-52; 2011:56-75). “Jude 6-7 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” (Loader 2010:33, citing Gagnon 2001:58-9 [better, 87-90?!]). Loader (2012:335) then more clearly cites Gagnon’s effort to squeeze an additional clobber text out of “other/different flesh” in Jude 7 as referring to “other males.” Loader points out that the reference to “other/different flesh” does not fit well with Gagnon’s interpretation that they are of the same flesh, namely males and hence the text more likely relates closely with the preceding reference (Jude 6) to angels with women and refers to the Sodomites’ attempt to have sex with the two visiting angels. He adds, however, that “This need not exclude an allusion to attempted same-sex rape, if we read the allusion from within the story [Gen 19] and what the men intended” (335, citing J.A. Loader, Tale of Two Cities,1990:124). But, of course, a biblical text describing attempted same-sex rape hardly provides a coherent basis for condemning consensual adults in loving same-sex relations (otherwise Nathan’s denunciation of David’s adultery could be read as a condemnation of the king’s “heterosexuality”); Hanks 2000/08:243-45; 2010:348-52; 2011:56-75). The related text, 2 Pet 2:6, does not specify same-sex relations but refers only generally to Lot’s liberation from the oppression of the “licentiousness [excess] of the lawless [Sodomites]” (Loader 2012:335-36). And Jesus’ reference to Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt 10:14-15 / Luke 10:10-12) clearly focuses on the “lack of hospitality, since it refers to the reception of those sent out in mission, not sex” (336).
Summary. Aside from Romans, the other six “clobber texts” treat of “violent inhospitality through attempted male rape” (Sodom), which Jude 7 refers to as the attempt to rape angels; sexual exploitation by slave traders and clients (1 Tim 1:10); and idolatrous and/or abusive male-male anal sex (Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9).

1.7 Romans 1:24, 26-27 (Loader 2010:11-29, 127-31; 2012:226-34, 292-326; Hanks 2000/08:88-96; 2006:582-605; 2010:144-65; 2011:76-114). Loader cites 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. Some points deserve emphasis but others I would question.

(1) One weakness immediately indicated is Loader’s introductory citation of Rom 1:24, 26-27 (2010:11; 2012:293), 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 Paul’s first springing of his rhetorical trap in 2:1-16 (see below). This omission obscures the fact that Paul here refers not to his contemporaries—much less ours—but to the decision of 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; Miller 2010:64-80). Like most, Loader concludes that in 1:18-32 Paul repeats common Jewish teaching evident in Wisdom 13:1-14:31 (see Gagnon, cited in 2010:128, note 17). However, Wisdom refers to the ignorance of contemporary Gentile idolaters, while 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 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). On the possible influence of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 in Romans 1 see Leviticus above.

(2) Paul lays his Rhetorical Trap, 1:18-32 (Loader 2010:12-14; 2012:294-97). 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 homoerotics.” (1996:302). Jewett insists that 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 perceptively, however, Diana Swancutt concludes that Paul’s aim in 1:18-32 is not to persuade, but to entrap, 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 deliberately coy about the identity of the “men/persons” he describes (1:18-19; “them…to them”; “O man,” 2:1, etc.; Loader 2012:294-95). His rhetorical skill is such that, as 1:18-32 was read in the Roman 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), Roman readers would not even realize that they themselves also had been rhetorically entrapped in 2:1-16 until Paul denounces their pride in 14:1-15:13: “That this verb 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 judgmental hypocrites (both Gentiles and Jews, 2:1-29) critical 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 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]” (Jewett 2007:200). “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 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 (see Gorman 2011:103-04 cited in Campbell note below).

Loader analyzes Paul’s strategy in 1:18-32 but calls it a rhetorical play (2010:13; 2012:295) that uses the baseball/cricket 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 Samuel 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 thus perceptively raises a key question (though poorly worded) that stems 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?” (2010:13). 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, (both for those addressed and for the descriptions of the sexual “uncleanness”) which hypocritical judgmental readers will seize upon in their rush into his trap, while he, as the letter unfolds, carefully proceeds to redefine and deconstruct his terminology, thus revealing a profounder dialectical theology (see Douglas Campbell 2010). In this deconstruction process, which earlier commentators overlook (Loader notes the trees but overlooks the forest):

(a) Some behavior is “dirty” (1:24) but later all things are declared cleansed (14:14, 20; Loader 2012:296-97).
(b) Behavior that is “unnatural” sounds condemned (1:26-27), but we later learn that even God sometimes acts “contrary to nature” with results that are overwhelmingly positive (11:24; Loader 2012:312).
(c) Society condemns some behavior as 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; Loader 2012:396-401).
(d) “Changes” may be suspect, whether they involve changing God for idols (1:19-23) or changing sexual practices (1:24, 26-27; Loader 2012:298), but change may also constitute the very essence of sanctification (12:1-2) and even involve the transformation the entire cosmos (8:18-23).

Note. “Gerd Theissen concluded that Paul appears to have been a repressed homosexual (1983/7:26)” (QBC 2000:598). Loader (2012:296, note 12) comments that I am here “mistakenly claiming Gerd Theissen in support (598), since the latter cites not his own view but that of others” (Loader cites the German original, 1983:238). However, Theissen nowhere indicates any disagreement with the authors he cites as perceiving Paul to be a repressed homosexual, but rather positively concludes his summaries with the comment: “I am of the opinion that something worth investigating lies hidden in all these presumptions and speculations” (1987:28). Theissen was, moreover, one of the earliest to propose that the relationship between the centurion and his beloved slave was homoerotic (Gerd Theissen, 1986/87, In the Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest for the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form, 106. London: SCM, 106. Neither does Loader cite Bishop John Spong’s classic argument for Paul’s homosexual orientation (1991:116-20, 125-26; see Appendix 1 below).

(3 In Rom 1:26-27 “Was Paul talking about heterosexuals and homosexuals?” (Loader 2010:20-22; 2012:84-85). In 1980 Boswell proposed that those whom Paul purportedly condemned in Rom 1:27 were not homosexuals, but heterosexual males engaging in homosexual acts (1980:109; cited, Loader:20b). However, in 1996 Brooten provided 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 found evidence in
magical practices and in discourses of medicine, astrology and philosophy (Loader 2012:84-85, note 62; 2010:20-21, citing Brooten 1996:8-9; Schoedel 2000:55; Smith 1996:223-56): “Such discussions are not to be equated with the complex theories of orientation of modern times and are at best rudimentary, 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” (2010:21).

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 dishonorable 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 2010:20, citing Gagnon #41-43, Notes n. 136, 142). Loader, however, more convincingly concludes (2010:21; cf 2012:85):

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 (Collins 2000:142, note 44; du Toit 2003:104; Via 2003:16).

(4) Four deconstructions (usually ignored or left unrelated to Rom 1:24-27!): (a) uncleanness, (b) unnatural, (c) shameful, (d) changes; cf. covetousness (not deconstructed). Paul emphasizes (3x) that “God gave them up/over” (1:24, 26, 28), which Gagnon interprets as a parental image, but Jewett, more correctly, as a judge handing over the guilty to be punished (Loader 2010:15; 2012: 298, notes 20-21).

(a) “Dirty, impure” (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” (appearing only later: 2:12 and 3:9), but as akatharsía (“uncleanness, impurity”; 1988:117; 2003:110-116; also 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,” as well as the vagueness of the addressee in 1:18-2:16). Countryman, taking Paul’s rhetorical ploy/ploy 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” (Loader 2010:13).

Loader comments: “I could wish that this reconstruction were so, but it does not adequately account for what is said” (2012:297). However, although Loader cites my QBC Romans commentary and related literature (2010:13, endnotes 12 and 15), he does not cite Paul’s text itself, where the Apostle boldly declares “All things are clean” (Rom 14:14, 20, commonly misleadingly paraphrased “All food is clean,” as in NVI). This mistranslation 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). Hultgren (2011:517) and Jewett (2007:859, 866-67) also failed to relate Paul’s declaring all things clean to the “uncleanness” in 1:24. Following Schmidt and Gagnon, Loader insists that “Paul… commonly used the language of impurity to address serious moral issues, especially in the sexual area” (2010:14, citing 1 Thes 4:3-7; also p. 16; 2012:297). However, Loader’s attempt to argue from the use of terminology in 1 Thes 4 fails to take into account that Paul there is not selecting ambiguous terms to lay a rhetorical trap containing a Decline of Civilization narrative. Loader (2012:231) also fails to note that in Rom 6:19 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).

The idolatry condemned (as in Rom 1:18-23, 25) in biblical literature 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). 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; Loader 2012:298 note 20, following Gagnon, disputes this insight of Küsemann, but makes to reference to Countryman 2003).

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; cf. Loader 2012:232). 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-lesebian people and Jews” (2003:217).

Rom 1:18-32 + 2:1-16 thus constitutes the first entrapment where Paul sets up those Jews and any others who, like them, assumed 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 those 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).

(b) “What is ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ according to Paul?” (2010:23-28; 2012:91-99, 308-15). In his 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 the 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” (2010:27). 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 term “nature/natural” is in 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 have said that the term qualifies as a prime example of “majority propaganda” (the most dangerous kind) imposing cultural prejudices on oppressed minorities. Loader cites Plato’s denial of the existence of “unnatural” same-sex behavior in the animal world (2010:25), but Boswell (1980) showed that observation of same-sex behavior and pair- bonding in animals goes back at least to Aristotle, and Bruce Bagemihl (1999) documents such behavior in some 450 species of mammals, birds, reptiles and insects (now more than 1500 species have been documented).
In his treatment of un/natural Loader (2010) 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; Loader correctly, 2012:312). 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” (though commanded by God); 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] Williams’ 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 in 2010 ignored Paul’s double reference to acts “against nature” in Rom 1:26 and 11:24, failing even to cite the latter reference (cf. 2012), 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 Cor, commentaries of G. Fee 1987:526-27; A. Thiselton 2006:176-77; 2000:844-48; David Garland 2003:530). Loader’s treatment here obscures what most recognize as the diversity of meanings in the rhetoric of Paul’s terminology of un/natural (23-24).

Remarkably, however, even Robert 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” who engrafts the Gentiles into the Jewish Olive Tree (2007:172-76, 692-93; similarly ignored by Hultgren 2011:411, but clearly recognized by Loader 2012:312). Bernadette Brooten in a footnote does cite Daniel Helminiak’s reference to Romans’ double occurrences of para phusis 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 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 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 to circumcise his male offspring and slaves, 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). He 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 (phusei, = birth) 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 phusis in an adjectival phrase (“Gentiles by nature,” 2:14), not adverbially (“by nature do”; 1996/2001:145, citing Paul Achtemeier 1985:45).* 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 phusis, 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 in the incarnation and defeated death by dying (Rom 8:3, 11), so God saves Gentiles, who act in excess of nature (Rom 1:26-27), by his own act in excess of nature (Rom 11:24; Rogers 1999:65, cited in Stuart 2003:96). Countryman observes, regarding Rom 11:24:

The inclusion of the Gentiles in the Christian community represents a break with the preceding order of things as substantial as God’s handing over of the Gentiles to their unclean culture...The constant, in both cases, is an assumption that there was a clear Gentile identity that God has altered not once, but twice: first in punishing the Gentile foundational sin of idolatry, and now, a second time, in incorporating Gentiles in the Christian community for reasons entirely of God’s own grace. Both acts were ‘unnatural’ acts (2003:196; see also p. 174; Gagnon 2001:390-91, note 68).


(c) **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; Loader 2010:16-17; 2012:227, 316-19). Few have recognized, however, that this perspective constitutes the third element in Paul’s deconstruction of Rom 1:24, 26-27 (Hanks 2000/08:92). Just as each verse (1:24, 26-27) 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);
- “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; 8:18-39; 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 (Jewett 2007:46-51, 173, 275, 293; Loader 2010:16-17; 2012:227, 316-19). Nevertheless, Jesus’ crucifixion (naked)—the most shameful experience in antiquity—is the central element in Paul’s gospel (Rom 3:21-26; 5:6-11)! Thus Paul later deconstructs his earlier rhetoric with the presentation of Jesus’ crucifixion (with the resurrection) as central to God’s cosmic redemption and liberation. In evident anticipation of the later emphasis on a crucified Messiah, Paul already had declared himself “not ashamed” of his gospel (1:16). 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 Romans 5:2-3, 11 in the three references to the appropriate boasting (in our hope, suffering and in God) wherein 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).

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” (2010:16; 2012:227, 316-19; italics mine)—and would be extended logically to women voluntarily abandoning feminine roles (Hanks 2007b; “Masculinidades en Romanos.” Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana. [Ribla] 56, 119-136. Quito, Ecuador). One of Jewett’s earlier insights, however, is also 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).

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 coveting 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” (2010:26). 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” (2010:29). He also cites Gagnon as referring to “innate passions perverted by the fall and exacerbated by idol worship” (2010:21, 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: “There is …clearly a ‘fall’ of sorts here in Romans 1, but it is a fall of the many because of idolatry, not the primeval fall of all because of Adam, and is comparable more to the topos of the ‘decline of civilization narrative’” (Loader 2012:301).

Dale Martin also 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 2007:26-31).

(d) Four pejorative “changes” and the recommended transformation (Loader 2012:298, 316-319). As Jewett emphasized, 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 (1:26); (#4) then the males, “leaving” the natural use of women, began to practice anal intercourse with other males (1:27). Gagnon (2001:251, 253) Jewett (2007:173) and Loader (2012:298) conclude that Paul implies that any such male ‘leaving’ of female partners is to be condemned as a sin comparable to idolatry (a conclusion promoted by the NIV translation “abandoned”; cf. NRSV more literally, almost casually: “leaving”). Thus the two CHANGES in sexual behavior (1:26b, 27, a result of divine abandonment) may appear just as negative as changing the true God for idols (1:23, 25, a human decision). 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). Jewett (2007:733) and Gagnon (2001:251-53) fail to relate the changes in Rom 1:18-32 to those in such texts as 12:1-2. 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 (1:23, 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 sanctification (12:1-2) and the 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 provides 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 (12:1-16), 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 this final case, Paul does not require establishment of universal heterosexuality, but commands avoiding adultery (13:9) and other “excesses” (aselgeia) and assorted lusts (“beds” koitais...’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 masculinity and that of his mainly unmarried male 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 elements (a, b, c, d) from his youth in what today we would call internalized homophobia. Wisdom of Solomon similarly saw idolatry producing porneia 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. In succeeding chapters Paul expounds his inclusive gospel, with a view to his Spanish mission and deconstructs the hypocritical judgmental readers, 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). Four ambiguous elements thus occur in his trap-baiting rhetoric (1:18-32), reinforced by a normative fifth negative element (prohibition of “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) “uncleaness” (1:24),
3) dishonourable/shameful (1:24, 26a, 27),
4) unnatural (1:26b, 27),
5) “desires/lusts/covetous passions” (prohibited in 1:24, 26a, 27; ⇒ reinforced in 13:8-10).

(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 scholars now recognize, in Rom 1:26 Paul does not speak of lesbians who “changed” male sex partners for female (cf. 1:27), but only of female sexual acts termed “unnatural,” that is, according to the ideology of the day, acts that avoid procreation. In 1995 Adventist scholar James E. Miller proposed interpreting 1:26 as referring to “unnatural” [=non-procreative] heterosexual acts (Novum Testamentum 35:1-11. Miller (2010: Ch.18) also cited early, powerful patriotic support (Clement of Alexandria and even Augustine). Thus Clement
(ca. 250 C.E.), referring to both Rom 1:26 and 27, commented: “Nature has not even permitted the most unclean animals to procreate by means of the passage of evacuation” (Paed. 2.87.1; pace Brooten 1983:287). In fact, for some 350 years after Paul wrote, church fathers understood Rom 1:26 to refer to women resorting to nonprocreative anal sex with males, never to female homoeroticism (Schreiner 1997:94 note 5 mistakenly refers to Miller’s heterosexual reading as “creative” although it was the exclusive patristic interpretation until Chrysostrom introduced his revisionist homoerotic reading ca. 400 AD!). Unlike many authors who cite only Brooten’s lengthy footnote critique of Miller’s article (1997:248-50), Loader interacts with the exegetical arguments of the article itself and even includes Miller’s on-line book “Raw Material” (2010) in his bibliography (2012:526), but fails to take into account the exclusive patristic support for Miller’s heterosexual interpretation of Rom 1:26 until 400 AD/CE. Miller and those who follow him have pointed out that

- very few ancient texts refer to lesbians (18 out of the 447 cited in Hubbard 2003; see Lev 18:22; 20:13);
- only five texts reflect observation of stable same-sex preferences (Hultgren 2011:101, 619);
- 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.), not orientations;
- 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 and 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 in 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 demonstrated 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 should note: “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 those few sources that refer to females (see Hubbard’s citations above).

Moreover, as Brooten, Gagnon and Jewett note, Rom 1:26 specifies “their females,” thus referring to the males as owning and controlling the females, but as Loader points out, “There is no equivalent phrased, ‘their males’
in 1:27” (2012:309). However, if the females of 1:26, like the males of 1:27, had abandoned their heterosexual partners to establish relationships with other females, it is difficult to see how Paul would continue to refer to them as owned and controlled by the males. Jewett, Hultgren and Loader also points out that Rom 1:26 specifies females who had changed the “natural use” (chresin) of a sex partner for a use “beyond/against nature” (para phusin). And Loader recognizes that chresin “derives from the notion that in sexual intercourse a man was understood to ‘use’ a woman and reflected an unequal relation where the man’s interest is paramount” (2012:309, citing Fredrickson 2000:199), which would best support the interpretation of women taking over the more active role in a heterosexual relation. 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 (2007:176, note 127, following Bernadette Brooten 1996:248-53, note 99 and her argument 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 (1983:177). Miller and Hultgren (2011:618) accept Scroggs’ emphasis on pederasty as correct, but not as an absolute limitation; similarly Craig Keener 2009:37 note 91; Loader includes references to those who interpret 1:26 as referring to bestiality or sex with angels; 2012:310).

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 seven and Moore’s twelve references span a period of more than 800 years with only four even roughly contemporaneous with Paul, two of whom were elite Latin authors (Hanks 2007a/2012). 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.

However, although 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, it is not exegetically significant for establishing Paul’s meaning. Ever 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 ask 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; Hanks 2007a/2012). Thus, as 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, 1996:247).

Significantly for evangelicals, in lectures in the 1960’s, Francis Schaeffer recognized that Rom 1:26 “does not speak of homosexuality” (1998:42-43). 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 (Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) 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.

Mathew Kuefler aptly comments, “In her otherwise superlative book on sexual activity between women in antiquity, Brooten (Love Between Women, 1996:195-302) is mistaken in her assertion that Paul condemned sex between women in this passage” (2001:383, note 55). Perhaps the fact that Miller’s article on Romans 1:26 (1995) was published shortly before Brooten’s work (1996) contributed to her rather hasty footnote response (99, pp. 248-250, which was expanded by Stephen Moore (2001:143-44), then followed by Gagnon (2001:297-
Citing 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 denials, Kuefler argues that the cultic prostitution and male cultic prostitutes (qadesh/qedishim, “holy ones”; kelebb/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) anal 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 inserting his reference to idolatry (1:25) between verses referring to sexuality (1:24…26-27).

Loader (2010:17-19) accepts Brooten’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.

(7) Rom 1:27 on idolatrous males practicing anal sex (☞ Hanks 2011:76-114; 2006:582-605). As Loader originally indicated (2010:19) 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.” He thus corrected 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 (cf. 2012:311, 315!). However, even if we follow the NIV (and Loader 2012:315), the male-male anal sex acts of 1:27 may be viewed as analogous to heterosexual anal sex acts (unnatural, avoiding procreation) in 1:26.


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

Although ignored in Hultgren’s recent commentary (2011), Loader approvingly summarizes Jewett’s creative 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 to 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 in themselves” (2010:19-20, summarizing Jewett 2007:179-80). I fail to see any basis in Jewett’s data 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 masculine and connected syntactically with “males”; 2007:180). After his approving summary of Jewett’s interpretation, Loader listed alternative proposals and concluded that “There remain a number of other unresolved issues” (2010:20); see Note. “Error” (planes) below.

Loader summarizes the long-standing debate over Robin Scroggs’ proposal (1983; Hanks 2006:593-94; Miller 2010:Ch.18) that sexual exploitation by pederasts is Paul’s main target in Romans 1:26-27, since they are the predominant concern in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman writers (Loader 2010:22-23). Loader points out that “research since Scroggs has concluded that Paul would have more in mind than just pederasty in Romans 1”
(23) and (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 (that women were seldom denounced for pederasty). Also incompatible with Scroggs’ emphasis on pederasty would be Countryman’s bracketing of Rom 1:24-27 as referring to sexual acts that are “unclean” but not necessarily sinful.

“Similarly also the males…inflamed with their desire/lust toward one another [mutual]….” Loader points out that Paul refers to males, burning in desire “for one another” (1:27), which implies “mutuality rather than exploitation and so apparently envisages also adult-adult sexual relations of mutual consent” (2010:23, citing Gagnon 2003:80 and Brooten 1996:361): “The reciprocity implied in eis allélous (‘towards one another’) (1:27) indicates that Paul’s concerns are as much with the active as the passive partners….what he has in mind is not primarily exploitative pederasty and certainly not limited to it. The same applies to Jewett’s speculation that Paul may have sexual abuse of slaves in mind” (Loader 2012:317-18, 325, citing Jewett 2007:181). Jewett emphasized that Paul may have had in mind the tenement house churches in Rome (Loader 2010:23), since almost all the names of those greeted in Rom 16 are slave names (Hanks 2000 / 2010). Similarly, Gagnon concludes: “In Rom 1:27 Paul speaks of the mutual gratification of the participants: ‘the males were inflamed with their yearning for one another, males with males’…. Paul was casting his net over every kind of consensual homosexual activity” (2003:80-81). But if Paul thus specifies adult acts expressing mutual consent and thus does not refer to paedophilia (Scroggs) nor to abuse of slaves (Jewett), then the two main areas of moral-ethical concern (child abuse, slave abuse) remain unaddressed! However, if we recall that Paul here incorporates a decline of civilization narrative as part of his rhetorical trap for judgmental readers, we may hesitate to emphasize such verbal details, 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 give precise guidance for his churches (cf. Rom 13:8-14; 1 Cor 5-7).

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; 2007:114-15). 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).* As Gagnon indicates, both Countryman and Schmidt say “that Paul consistently used plane [error] …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 to emperor veneration in Roman religion. Jewett (207:180), however, opposes the interpretation (“error” = idolatry) and prefers to interpret plane in 1:27e as sexual misconduct (1:24, 26-27a). Others similarly designate the “error” to be excessive passion or homosexual activity (Schmithals, Fredrickson 2000:215-217, Moo 1996:116, Fitzmyer 288, Wright 2002:434, Talbert 68, Swancutt 2003:212) while Brooten leaves the question open (1996:257-58). In 2010 Loader leaves the identification of the “error” and the “payback” an unresolved issue (20) but in 2012 Loader proposes a “both-and” conclusion, affirming that the “error” of 1:27 surely refers “to their sexual behavior, but probably also alludes, as it often does, to idolatry, though not exclusively, the perversion which in the first place generated the perverted behavior” (318).


(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 (2010:12; see 2012:293-94) also recognizes Paul’s missionary purpose: “Broadly speaking Paul is writing Romans because he plans to visit them and enlist their support for his future plan of a mission to Spain (15:22-29).” However, elsewhere he overlooks Paul’s rhetorical trap and gives priority to Justification Theory (see D. Campbell), holding that the purpose of Romans 1–4 is to prove that “all have sinned” (3:9, 21; Loader 2010:12-13, citing John Nolland 2000; similarly 2012:294, 326). This implies that Paul’s purpose in 1:18-32 involves making clear the sinfulness of all 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 target the arrogant, inhospitable members of Roman churches whom he will exhort to solidarity in hospitality and mission (14:1-15:13, 22-29).

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 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; also Allan Chapple, 2011:193-212 in note below).

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’s 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 thus 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 “whoever 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” (197).

Swancutt (2004:45), developing the conclusions of Stanley Stowers (1994), emphasizes the importance of continuing our reading of Rom 1:18-32 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 all same-sex acts are sinful 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 prejudiced listeners/readers 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 create 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 impose 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 expect listeners to deduce a clear code of sexual ethics from his rhetorical “Decline of Civilization” narrative in 1:18-32? Today we still face a multiplication of possibly intended “codes” arguing that 1:27 targets (1) only “perversion”—homosexual acts by heterosexual males—or (2) pedophilia, or (3) sexual abuse and exploitation of slaves, or (4) 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 such 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 in 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 their 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 okouméne, because it seems that the southern and eastern limits were in the process of being reached by others” (212).

(9) Douglas Campbell (2009): Romans 1:18-32 as Paul’s citation of a false teacher he later refutes. Loader (2010 and 2012) does not cite nor include in his bibliographies Douglas Campbell’s magnus opus on Romans (2009). 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 prosopopoeia [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, and “Reviews”, “Campbell Excursus”; Hanks 2007a/2012, Appendix 5).

2. Non-explicit Texts (Loader’s views, 2010:33-34; 2012 passim)
2.1 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 2010:34, citing Gagnon 2003:72, 75; Loader 2012:337-38). 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?!, 2007:634). Confronted with Gagnon’s inconsistency and Davidson’s absurdity, Paul might plead attention to his “more excellent way,” 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 as indicated by porneia 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, whom Loader surprisingly ignores). Since many members in Paul’s churches were ex/slaves who sexually served their owners or earned 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 2010:34, citing 2005:158-60; see 2012:143-46, 273). 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; 2012:489-90). John the Baptist’s strict application of Leviticus’ incest laws 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 (Lev. 18:19; 20:18; see the 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 (“sexual exploitation of another male” 2012), but more likely refers to “wrongdoing through adultery” (Loader 2010:34; similarly, 2012:338).
1 Cor 7:5 (Loader 2010:34, citing Loader 2005:158-60; see 2012:36-37, 486). “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” (2010:34; see Countryman Romans 1:24).


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 2010:33, citing J. David Hester’s 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. References to eunuchs would be appropriate in royal contexts (2012:436-44).

Gen 1:27 and 2:20-24 (2010:10-11; 2012:27-28) depict the making of male and female and then their rejoining: “These texts quite clearly serve as a basis for instruction about Christian marriage [or rather, about Jewish “divorce”?]…in Mark 10:2-9 [male-female sex as definitive and exclusive] (11).” Loader also (2012:28) cites Phyllis Bird (2000:166-67): “the stories’ focus is etiological, explaining how things came to be the way they are, and have no interest in variations or deviations from the dominant pattern”). Thus, “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 2010:11; see Jesus, Paul and his colleagues). In Mark 10:2-9 // Matthew 19:3-9 “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 2010:33, citing Gagnon 2005:71[-72]). Note. See “5. Divorce” in
Loader 2012 review. In the Bible no two texts say the same thing: Matthew permits one exception, Paul another; Ezra and Nehemiah command Israelite males to divorce idolatrous foreign wives; Abraham expels Hagar in Genesis 16.

NT Note 1. 1 Cor 14:33b-36. “Women in worship: 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36” (Loader 2010:55-56); “Men and Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36” (2012: 383-89; see also 1 Tim, 417-29). In both 2010 and 2012, after summarizing major alternatives, Loader rejects the conclusion that 1 Cor 14:34-35 (commanding women/wives to maintain silence in the house church assemblies) represents a later scribal interpolation inserted into Paul’s original text. Following Gordon Fee (1987), I have repeatedly argued for recognition of such an interpolation (2000/08:99-102; 2010:168-70). Loader provides thorough bibliographical support for each position, citing even Philip Payne’s 1998 article giving new manuscript evidence for an interpolation: Unfortunately, however, Loader was not able to include Payne’s latest book (2009), which provides decisive support and arguments in favor of the interpolation. Loader concludes similarly in both 2010 (56) and 2012 (388-89) that Paul in 14:33b-36 only aimed to silence women teachers (taking over a male role), but permitted women prophets (11:2-16), “an issue of sensitivity detected also behind Romans 1” (2010:56):

In conclusion, a case can be made for seeing 1 Cor 14:33b-36 as integral to the text and also to Paul’s thought….In this view women should accordingly take their place in subordination to men (whether their fathers, guardians or husbands) and reflect that in their demeanour, both in dress and in refraining from active speech [teaching] in liturgical contexts. At the same time, beside this norm were exceptions where women would assert leadership, including as prophets. Paul affirms both traditional roles, as did his forefathers in the early Christian movement (2012:388-89).

In his treatment of the many problematic texts regarding women, which Loader sees as often reflecting prejudices unacceptable in the church today, he prepares the way for his similar case regarding what he concludes are Paul’s prejudices against sexual minorities. His argument regarding texts he interprets as anti-gay is thus strengthened by his extensive treatment of women’s issues, viewed as irreparably sexist, similarly in need of hermeneutical solutions and thus not to be accepted literally as guidance for churches today.

2.2 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 2010:33; similarly 2012:336-37, citing Helminiak 127-29 and critique in Gagnon, Notes, n. 59). John 4 (//?) describes an official’s son. My treatments of the Centurion texts in Matthew and Luke make clear Loader’s deficits in exegesis and citation of significant recent literature.

John 14–21 Jesus’ relation with the beloved disciple as homoerotic. “Most improbable” (Loader 2010:33; “highly speculative” 2012:337), but ignoring Ted Jennings entire weighty book on the subject (2003; see my summary and review); in both 2010 and 2012 Loader cites in support only Hanks’ QBC 2006:584.

NT Note 2. Bloch, Ariel and Chana Bloch, The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary (New York: Random House, 1995). This “commentary of commentaries” about The Song of Songs creates a dichotomy between the Hebrew Bible and the supposed “antipathy to sexuality in the New Testament” (1995:11). However, if we read Jesus and Paul in continuity with the Song of Songs rather than presuppose their conformity to neoplatonic sex-body negativism, we get a very different picture. That Jesus and Paul remained unmarried, exalted various types of “eunuchs” (Mat. 19:12) and sometimes defended women against patriarchal prejudices need not imply that they were sexually inactive or opposed to all physical expressions of sexuality including homoeroticism (1 Corinthians 7). If—instead of using a few negative biblical verses to function as “control texts”—we employ the positive Song of Songs as the basis for a canonical reading of the negative texts a radically different picture emerges (cf. William Loader’s use of isolated verses to cancel the positive thrust of the entire canonical book of Song of Songs; 2010:28; 2012:233).

Conclusions. Since he usually accepts Gagnon’s exegetical conclusions (Appendix 2 below), for contemporary guidance in the use of biblical texts Loader must have frequent recourse to his hermeneutic of love (2010:7). In a personal letter [Oct 30, 2012] he explains: “I treat this material cross-culturally, that is with respect for its world but without any sense of obligation that I must agree with it, so I have no interest in colonizing the text with exegetical conclusions which might match my views (as do many, including Gagnon), but on the contrary want to uphold the integrity of the text, even when I disagree with it (I also don’t believe the world is flat, after all).” As Loader explains more fully in the later volume:
Sexual Ethics must always address much more than commands and prohibitions. Ultimately, any hermeneutic needs therefore to be informed by what is at the heart of the Christian message attested in these texts, namely the goodness and generosity of God whose love reaches out to value and offer relationship to all people. Arguably a hermeneutic consistent with such a stance will measure every text in every new situation by its effectiveness in giving expression to that love and respect and countering whatever undermines it….Paul’s anthropology in relation to sexual orientation needs supplementing with the reality that not all who engage in sexual intimacy with those of their own kind are engaging in perversion. Those who are not should not then stand under the same judgement, but like all, be challenged to exercise the expression of their humanity in a way which is conformed to and informed by the generosity and goodness of God who confronts our reality and challenges us to authentic fulfillment” (2012:499-500)

Students may find such a dependence on hermeneutics sufficient for advocating human rights for sexual minorities, but non-academic types (even politicians and judges) often need to hear stronger protests against traditional exegesis. Academic writers, secure in their hermeneutical castles, sometimes “give away the store” on exegetical questions (Rom 1:26 misinterpreted as referring to lesbians; “unnatural” as implying sinful; 1 Cor 14-34-35 accepted as authentically pauline) and then wonder that political decisions by laity (who find biblical hermeneutics too complicated to bother with) are more determined simply by what “The Bible says” (ever more susceptible to correction of translations by exegesis). Loader does present Gagnon’s exegetical conclusions as tentative and with a significant 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 exegesis and hermeneutics. The interpreter should not make an either/or choice but rigorously engage in both. Like Israel’s preference for alliances with Egypt, denounced as a “weak reed” (2 Kings 18:21), an over-dependence on hermeneutics may unintentionally set back the cause of justice for the oppressed. 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, can be 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, appears significant.

2012 Book cover: “Bill Loader’s superlative multivolume study on sexuality in ancient Judaism and Christianity comes to completion with this consideration of the New Testament’s perspective on sexuality. Here Loader combines judicious handing of individual texts with high-level reflection on the conceptual and ethical outlook that underpinned New Testament views on sexuality. This is New Testament scholarship at its very best, written by a scholar who has wrestled with the meaning of individual texts, delved into the societal setting of such writings, and grappled with the religious forces that shaped views on sexuality. A magisterial study which will enrich the understanding of all who read it.” Paul Foster, University of Edinburgh.

“The New Testament on Sexuality is essential reading for scholars and students alike. Throughout the book Loader reveals his mastery not only of the New Testament but also of Jewish and Greco-Roman sources. One finds detailed examination of some of the most difficult and highly contentious issues related to New Testament evidence, such as attitudes to virginity and same-sex intercourse, celibacy, slavery and sexuality, the relationship between sexuality and leadership, and sex in an alternate society. Loader displays an impressive command of the vast array of scholarly literature….This is a study that I will no doubt turn to time and time again, not only for its comprehensive analysis of texts but also for its many challenging and original insights.” Margaret Y. MacDonald. St. Francis Xavier University.
Appendix 1: Was the Apostle Paul Heterosexual?

Like the classic Baptist booklet on “The Biblical Evidence for Infant Baptism” (containing only blank pages), so would this treatise appear were we to cite all the evidence and arguments for Paul’s heterosexuality provided in the voluminous scholarly literature on Paul. The question has been studiously (not to say “neurotically”) avoided. Presumably this has been due to the captivity of authors to job insecurity, the dominant heterosexist ideology (undoubtedly involving homophobia in many cases) and the assumption that since the dominant forms of Judaism and Christianity traditionally have condemned “sodomy” and “sodomists” to imprisonment, torture and death, it was literally unthinkable to question the Apostle’s sexual orientation. Still, were a 60-year old Paul to appear miraculously for TV interviews today, intrepid journalists undoubtedly would hasten to ask “Were you ever married?” “How many children did you have?” “Never even a serious girl friend?!” And then, if it is a family channel, watching parents would assume the subject to be gay, while journalists hurriedly change the subject, allowing the (supposedly innocent) children to retire in blissful ignorance. One evangelical professor friend once responded to the obvious alternative hypothesis (that Paul probably was a repressed homosexual) with the comment that it was “novelistic.” But would it not be infinitely more “novelistic” (highly improbable) to suppose that Paul ran around all over the Roman Empire for decades but somehow never found the “right woman”?

The rare exceptions to the scholarly neglect have come mainly from Germany, where post-war awareness about the killing of homosexuals in the Holocaust may have prompted more boldness on the part of a few. Thus, Gerd Theissen (1983/87), in what for almost three decades has been the most citied study on the Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology, wrote:

[Hermann] Fischer’s new idea [1974] is that Paul was forced throughout his life to repress latent homosexual tendencies. Devaluation of the flesh is said to generalize defense against a particular “fleshy” inclination to everything pertaining to the body. Paul’s strong judgment on homosexual behavior in Rom. 1:25-27 is also held to be a reaction to this inclination. Even before Fishcer, S. Tarachow [1955] had postulated in more general form a passive homosexuality in Paul

Remarkably, in the almost three decades since the publication of Theissen’s prestigious pioneering work I have noted literally hundreds of references to its contents, but never a single mention of this revolutionary paragraph, much less any article attempting to confirm or refute the hypothesis he presents! However, where angels fear to tread, Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong rushed in (1991:116-20, 125-26), developing independently a similar hypothesis, but with no reference to the works of Theissen, Fischer or Tarachow:

Some have suggested….that Paul was plagued by homosexual fears….With the softening of that [traditional] homophobic stance we might consider that Paul may have been a gay male. We might test that theory by assuming it for a moment as we read Paul. When I did this for the first time, I was startled to see how much of Paul was unlocked and how deeply I could understand the power of the gospel that literally saved Paul’s life….I see no evidence to suggest that Paul ever acted out his sexual desires and passions….Nothing else…could account for Paul’s self-judging rhetoric, his negative feeling toward his own body, and his sense of being controlled by something he had no power to change. The war that went on between what he desired with his mind and what he desired with his body, his drivenness to a legalistic religion of control…his attitude toward women, his refusal to seek marriage as an outlet for his passion—nothing else accounts for this data as well as the possibility that Paul was a gay male (116-17)…..

He drew, through love and grace, all people to himself as he restored them to themselves, building finally that inclusive community in which there is neither Jew nor gentile, bond nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ, whose love can embrace even the outcasts of society, even the one pronounced depraved and called an abomination, the one who by the mandate of the Law stood under the sentence of death. This is the way my thesis would suggest that the gospel of Jesus Christ was experienced by Paul, the man from Tarsus. To me it is a beautiful idea that a homosexual male, scorned then as well as now, living with both the self-judgment and the social judgments that a fearful society has so often knowingly pronounced upon the very being of some of its citizens, could nonetheless, not in spite of this but because of this be the one who would define grace for Christian people. For two thousand years of Christian history this Pauline definition has been at the very core of the Christian experience. Grace was the love of God, an unconditional love that loved Paul just as he was. A rigidly controlled gay male, I believe taught the Christian church what the love of God means and what, therefore, Christ means as God’s agent…..

When people consider scandalous this idea that a homosexual male might have made the grace of God clear to the church, I reply, “Yes, it is scandalous, but is that not precisely how the God of the Bible seems to work?” It is as

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scandalous as the idea that the Messiah could be crucified as a common criminal. It is as scandalous as the idea that a birth without acknowledged paternity could inaugurate the life that made known to us the love and grace of God. It also suggests that heterosexual people might be deeply indebted to homosexual people for many spiritual gifts that arise out of the very being of their unique life experience. Indeed, I have been the recipient of just that kind of gift from the gay and lesbian people who have shared with me their journey with God through Christ (125-26).

The perception of Paul as a repressed homosexual thus enables us to better account for the following:

- His living situation in Corinth with eight other single males (Romans 16:21-23);
- His friends (especially “beloved” males) greeted in the five tenement house churches: almost all unmarried slave-class (Rom 16:3-16);
- His determination to proclaim a law-free Gospel and Christ as the “end of the Law” (Rom 10:4);
- His incorporation of uncircumcised, sexually “unclean” pagans/Gentiles into God’s people (Rom 11:17-24);
- His separate treatment of Sodom’s judgment (Rom 9:29) from male-male anal sex (1:27);
- His determination that churches practice Abrahamic hospitality (Gen 18; Rom 15:1-13);
- His emphasis on the sin of excessive desire/coveting as behavioral norm for the churches (Rom 13:8-10);
- In Romans 1:18-32 he reflects awareness of the prohibitions of male-male anal sex in Lev 18:22 and 20:13; yet the four negative elements in the rhetoric of 1:24-27 are deconstructed later in the letter;
- His emphasis on God’s universal gracious love and Christ’s death for the “ungodly” (Rom 5:6; cf 1:18);
- His special relationship with Timothy (1-2 Timothy) and rush to personally circumcise him (Acts 16:3), despite general aversion to the practice (Galatians 5:1-12; 6:11-17; Romans 2:25-29).

After reading Gerd Theissen’s hypothesis, like Bishop Spong, I began to reread Paul with the scandalous notion that he might have been gay, and was similarly impressed that it was like a key that unlocked much that previously had seemed puzzling, incoherent or unthinkable. At a family reunion focusing on my own life and coming out experience, in response to questions, I even dared to share my growing conviction that Paul was gay with my Bible-loving Southern Baptist aunt, half-expecting the earth to swallow me. She listened thoughtfully (Paul had always given her trouble); then her face lighted up as she made her only comment: “Well, obviously!”

Bibliography: Paul a repressed homosexual?


Appendix 2

Gagnon references in Loader 2010 (20 pp.; 48 endnotes, 12X; all in Chapter 2 except one in Chapter 3) 7 +Notes 1-4 cite Gagnon and Dan O. Via (2003), who agree that “the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally” (7, citing Via 2003:93). Earlier the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice and present “an unambiguous and unconditional condemnation of homosexuality” (Via, 4) were identified as Gen 19:1-29; Judges 19; Lev 18:22 and 20:13 (Via, 5); 1 Cor 6:9-10 and Rom 1:21-27 (Via, 11), although all of them refer to sexual acts, not orientations and only Rom 1:26 has (mis)interpreted to refer to female homoeroticism. Via then admits that what the narratives in Gen 19 and Judges 19 actually portray and condemn is specifically “homosexual gang rape” (5), but in his argument this is equated with “homosexual practice” (as if the prophet Nathan’s condemnation of David’s adultery and murder constituted a condemnation of his “heterosexuality”). Loader similarly cites Andrie du Toit as supporting a dialectical tension between “the biblical position on homosexuality” and the love commandment, which should be given precedence (Via 7). Loader (7) thus indicates his agreement with Via and de Toit regarding “exegesis” (“what the key biblical texts meant”) and how the three disagree with Gagnon’s major conclusion only regarding “hermeneutics” (“how they should be employed today”)
13 Note 16 cites Gagnon 2001:273-7 to refute Countryman on 1:24 and uncleanness/impurity.
15 Note 17 cites Gagnon (2001) Jewett and Brooken on sexual wrong doing resulting from idolatry
XNote 18 cites Gagnon (2001) about God like a parent handing people over to their punishment.
16 Note 20 cites Gagnon 2001 and Jewett 2007 on impurity (Rom 1:24) being moral as well as cultic
18 Note 27 cites Brooken and Gagnon (Notes n. 91 on Rom 1:26 referring to feminine homoerotic acts;
19 Note 28 cites Gagnon 2003 on Paul’s lack of concern for procreation
+ Note 29 cites Gagnon 2001 on Paul’s lack of concern for procreation.
21 XNote 40 cites Gagnon 2003 on Paul’s understanding of sexual orientation
XNote 41 cites Gagnon’s Notes 136 on Paul’s understanding of sexual orientation
XNote 42 cites Gagnon’s Note 142 on Adam’s fall and homosexual orientation
XNote 43 cites Gagnon’s Note 142 on Paul and modern understanding of sexual orientation
22 Note 48 cites Gagnon 2003 on the breadth of sex acts referred to in Rom 1:26-27
+ Note 52 cites Gagnon 2003 and Note 93 on Rom 1:27 implying adults in mutual consent
23 +54 cites Gagnon 2003 on Gentiles who should have deduced God’s heterosexual preference from creation
24 X55 cites Gagnon 2003 and 2001: Gentiles should have deduced complementarity from creation
X56 cites Gagnon’s Note 88 on implicit argument from design in Rom 1:18-23
+62 cites Gagnon 2001 on wife under husband in Rom 7:2
26 +78 cites Gagnon 2001 on argument from excess passion on unnatural sex in Rom 1:26-27
27 +80 cites Gagnon 2001 and Notes 82 on nature, convention, creation and rejection of excess
+81 cites Gagnon 2001 on “male and female” in Rom 1:26-27 as echoing Gen 1:27
X83 cites Gagnon 2003 on his assumption regarding anatomical complementarity
28 +86 cites Gagnon 2001 and Notes 136: Rom 1 argues basically from idolatry, not Fall pace Hays
X87 cites Gagnon 2001 and Notes 82 that Fall still lies in background as cause of same-sex passions
X88 cites Gagnon Notes 142 on Fall as cause of dishonorable homosexual passions
+89 cites Gagnon 2001, following Brooken, on Rom 1:32 as probably alluding to Lev 20:13
+90 cites Gagnon 2003: from “natural” = creation, Ps-Phoc and Philo Paul rejects all same-sex acts
+96 cites Gagnon 2003 on Paul’s confident aim to provoke revulsion with reference to same-sex acts
X97 cites Du Toit and “cf. Gagnon” 2001 regarding the offensiveness of same-sex acts in Rom 1.
29 +102 cites Gagnon 2003: “soft-males” (1 Cor 6:9) as not effeminacy generally but passive in anal sex
30 +103 cites Gagnon 2003: not making “soft-males” more specific (abusive, with slaves, prostitutes…..)
?112 cites Gagnon Notes 111 on “male-beds” as general reference to male penetrators in same-sex acts
31 +116 cites Gagnon 2001: Paul might have used more specific term if general sense not intended
+117 cites Gagnon 2001: appeal to law in 1 Tim 1:10 (“male-beds”) envisages biblical law
33 +119 cites Gagnon 2003: speculation that Jude 7 implies same-sex relations (Loader: refers to angels)
X120 cites “Cf. Gagnon” 2003: Sodom’s inhospitality focus, not sex, in Jesus teaching Mt 10 // Lk 10
+121 cites Gagnon 2003 on Jesus´ divorce teaching as implying sex limited to heterosexual marriage
+123 cites Gagnon Notes 59: critique of Helminiak on gay centurion and beloved slave
+124 cites Gagnon Notes 59 to refute speculation about Jesus and his Beloved Disciple
34 +125 cites Gagnon 2001 on Mk 9:42 possibly alluding to pederasty, despite later ref. to believers
+127 cites Gagnon 2001: Porneia in Mk 7:20-21 vice list probably implied same-sex inclusion
+128 cites Gagnon 2003: similarly for list I Apostolic decree in Acts 15:29
35 +31 (Chapter 3): Mark 10:6-9 on divorce probably implies only male-female unions valid

Gagnon references in Loader 2012 (40 pages; 63 footnotes, all but one pp.22-33 and 293-338 on Same-Sex
22-33 [Male] Same-Sex Intercourse (8 pp.; 13 notes; + = Gagnon correct; 2X = incorrect; ? = uncertain)
23 [note 44 cites Via 2003 on Lev 18 terms with a cultic background (defilement, depravity and abomination)]
+24 note 45 cites Gagnon 2003 to refute Via’s limitation of Lev 18 to cultic concerns
+25 note 51 cites Gagnon 2003 and 2001 to refute Milgrom’s procreation limitation of Levitical texts.
+26 note 55 cites Gagnon 2003 the Levitical death penalty (20:13) indicates the guilt of both males
+27 note 57 cites Gagnon 2001 on the role of the Genesis creation stories and the complementarity of the sexes
+28 note 59 cites Gagnon 2001 on the fullness of God’s image manifest in the union of male and female
+note 60 on the use of mythic language in the creation stories
+note 62 cites Gagnon 2001 and 2003 on the Genesis creation stories as prescriptive, not just etiological
?note 63 cites Gagnon 2001 on the Genesis creation stories as comprehensive, brooking no exceptions
+29 note 69 cites Gagnon 2001 on the male disgrace and humiliation suffered in male rape
Xnote 71 cites Gagnon 2001 on his speculation that the males of Sodom engaged in male-male sex
X30 note 75 cites Gagnon 2001 and 2003: texts on male rape implying condemnation of all same-sex relations
?note 76 cites 2001 and 2003 where Gagnon argues that Ham raped his father Noah analy
?31 note 77 cites 2001 and 2003 where Gagnon takes “dog” in Deut 23:17-18 as referring to a male prostitute

+90 Note 94 cites evidence of reciprocal homoerotic love (Chapter 2)

293-338 Same-Sex Intercourse (32 pp. 53 notes, 10X; Rm 1:26: 309-315, notes 61-90; 67 total notes 2012)

+297 note 15 refuting Countryman on impurity in Rom 1:24
+298 note 20 same-sex intercourse provokes God’s wrath
+299 note 21 on sense of God’s abandoning people to their plight
+301 notes 32 a fall in Rom 1 but a fall of many from idolatry, not the primeval fall of all because of Adam
+34 not to be equated with the fall of Adam and its consequences
+35 allusion to male and female in Gen 1:26-27 likely reflects language of Gen 1:27
+303 notes 39 same-sex intercourse, like idolatry, a deliberate suppression of the truth seen in creation
+40 impurity in Rom 1:24 means immorality
+305 note 44 Paul condemns not only the actions but also same-sex passions
+306 note 49 on same-sex desire not simply a manifestation of excess heterosexual passion
X307 note 54 Paul clearly treats not just acts but both mind/passions and acts as blameworthy
X309 note 61 in Rom 1:26 chresin (= intercourse, not pejoratively “use” but Gagnon exaggerates the positive;
+310 note 64 female homoeroticism Paul’s “best worst” example of sexual perversion
+311 notes 70 on Rom 1:26 perhaps contraceptive oral or anal sex, thought without parallel in the literature
+71 Rom 1:26 interpreted with an argument from design: transparent m.-f. genital complementarity
+313 note 80 Paul nowhere shows himself concerned with procreation since Jesus’ 2d coming believed near
+314 notes 85 Creation story implies that only m.-f. sexual complementarity in marriage acceptable to God
X86 Gagnon’s unlikely suggestion that Paul may have known T. Naph. 3:3-4 on ideal world
+315 notes 88 Both acts and misdirected passions run contrary to God’s created order = nature
+90 Everyone can recognize homoeroticism as wrong, just as they can recognize God
+317 note 94 Rom 1:27 shame results both from male being penetrated and extends to penetrator
+318 note 105 Jewett’s translation of Rom 1:27: anal (“tightness”) seems somewhat forced
+320 note 114 Rom 1:26-27 refers to “every kind of consensual homoerotic activity” [with slaves?!]
+322 note 119 In Rom1:24-27 ‘homosexuality’ is not a chosen condition of constitutional heterosexuals
+122 Paul probably aware of lifelong homoerotic proclivity (see “soft males” in 1 Cor 6:9)
+323 notes 123 Paul condemns all same-sex acts whatever orientation people had
+124 Paul knew of differing sexual orientations but condemned all same-sex acts anyway
X125 “innate passions perverted by the fall and exacerbated by idol worship”
+126 “modern-day theories of sexual orientation are compatible with Paul’s concept of sin”
X127 the fall is the ultimate explanation for how some people had perverted sexual orientations
+324 note 133 Srooggs emphasized Rom 1:27 as exploitative pederasty and 1:26 as illicit heterosexual intercourse
+325 notes 134 Jews regarded Lev 18:22 and 20:13 as absolutes against all male-male sex
+136 “for one another” (1:27) depicts mutual desire, not limited to exploitative pederasty
X326 note 139 Paul’s disgust at same-sex intercourse is // to other Jews and reflects Lev 18:22 and 20:13
+328 note 150 “Soft males” in 1 Cor 6:9 are those who take the passive role in any male-male anal sex
+329 note 160 “Male-beds” may refer to males who engage boys as prostitutes
X331 notes 169 “Male-beds” are males who engage in sexual penetration of other males, not limited to force
+171 Both terms in 1 Cor 6:9-10 used in broad sense, not just pederasty
+174 “Soft-males” a broadly generic term to avoid narrowing focus to particular meaning
+332 note 175 1 Cor 6:9-10 male-beds = males who engage in anal penetration of other males
+333 notes 179 Decalogue items commonly expanded with related themes: adultery ➔ other sexual sins
General Bibliography (Bold face = important but lacking in Loader)


--------. [www.robgagnon.net](http://www.robgagnon.net). See especially reviews of Myers and Scanzoni (2005M&S); Plain Sense (2000BalchPS); Countryman (2003WC); Rogers (2006JR); Childs (2003JC); N.Elliot (?NE).


-------- (2009). The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.


(Refutes the modern theory of “complementarity” often misused by Gagnon)


Stanford: Stanford University. (See “Sex and the Single Apostle,” 133-172, 253-268.)


