Immaculate & Powerful

The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality

Edited by Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles
Bibliography


Four

Paul's Views on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism*

Bernadette J. Brooten

Paul's condemnation of sexual love relations between women in Romans 1:26 is central to his understanding of female sexuality, nature, and the relationship between women and men. Because of the role of Christianity in the Western world, the New Testament's ethical advice, its images of women and of men, and its attitudes toward sexuality have helped to shape Western concepts of the family and of the proper place of women in society, as well as legislation on marriage and sexuality.

Paul's Letter to the Romans, written in the formative stage of Christianity, came, in the course of time, to be normative for Christian theology. It is one of the most widely read and preached-upon books of the New Testament. In the present church debate on ordination and sexual orientation, Paul's teaching on sexual love relations between women and between men (Rom. 1:26–27) plays an important role. In contemporary public policy debates, fundamentalist groups opposing the right of lesbians and gay men to be protected from discrimination in employment, housing, or custody of their children often quote the Letter to the Romans as an authority. Sexuality has to do with power. An important insight of the

*This article was written within the context of the "Frau und Christentum" project of the Institut für ökumenische Forschung, University of Tübingen, West Germany. I would like to thank the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk, which is funding this project, as well as the following members of the project team for providing critical comments, typing the manuscript, and doing bibliographical work: Inge Baumann, Christina Bucher, Jutta Flatters, and Linda Maloney. I am currently preparing a book-length study on the topic of the present essay in which I plan to include more extensive documentation and critical discussion.
Innaculate and Powerful

women's movement has been that, as women, we cannot determine the direction of our lives as long as others control our bodies. Feminists have discovered that sexuality is not simply a matter of romantic love, nor is it a changeless, purely biological phenomenon; rather, sexuality is determined by societal structures. By looking at ethical teachings on female sexuality, as well as by studying the ways in which women experience sexuality, we can learn about hierarchy, about superordination and subordination in a given society. Thus, to understand female sexuality is not simply to understand just one other area of women's lives. It is to understand an area of female existence in which power is acutely expressed.

It is essential to distinguish between what men have taught about women's sexuality and how women have experienced sexuality. What Paul taught is not to be identified with what early Christian women thought or how they lived. Paul's thinking has contributed, nevertheless, in a significant way to the Christian construction of female sexuality, and is therefore intertwined with Christian women's lives. The purpose of this study is to understand Paul within his cultural context. This can help us to examine critically our own thinking about female sexuality and nature, and our appropriation of Paul's thought within our own cultural context.

A central message of Paul's Letter to the Romans is that all who believe in Christ are justified. In Romans 1:18 to 3:20, Paul sets the background for this message by describing how all human beings are in need of justification, how without Christ they live under the power of sin and stand condemned. Everyone has had the opportunity to know God through God's created works, and therefore human beings are without excuse for having turned from God to idols. The result is serious, according to Romans 1:24-27 (RSV).

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameful acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Thus, Paul sees sexual relations between women and between men to be a result of idolatry; they signify estrangement between human beings and God.

The focus of this essay is Romans 1:26, in which Paul speaks of the unnatural relations of their women. While the condemnation of male homosexual acts in verse 27 is related to that in verse 26, the issue is not parallel and cannot be subsumed under sexual love relations between women. It is my thesis that Paul's condemnation of female homoeroticism is closely connected with his view that there should be gender differentiation in appearance because of the man's being the head of woman (see 1 Cor. 11:2-16). Paul could well share with other contemporary authors who commented on female homoeroticism and proper female sexual roles the view that sexual relations between women implied that women were trying to be like men, that is, to transcend the passive, subordinate role accorded to them by nature. Indeed, I interpret Paul's words "exchanged natural relations for unnatural" to mean that the women exchanged the passive, subordinate sexual role for an active, autonomous one. If I am correct, it should be clear that Paul's condemnation of sexual love relations between women is of fundamental significance for his understanding of female sexuality.

Female Homoeroticism in the Greco-Roman World

Paul's theological thinking about women was culturally conditioned by his environment. To understand his views, we must determine where Romans 1:26 fits into the ancient spectrum of views on female homoeroticism. Understanding the historical context is necessary so we do not interpret Paul anachronistically, but rather locate his thinking within the contemporary discussion about female sexuality of his own time.

Jewish Authors

The Hebrew Bible does not prohibit sexual relations between women, although it does forbid male homosexual intercourse: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them" (RSV, Lev. 20:13, cf. Lev. 18:22). Pseudepigraphal Jewish literature does take up the issue of sexual intercourse between women. The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides, a Greek poem prob-
ably written by a Jewish author of the Diaspora, contains a section on proper sexual behavior, marriage, and family life. Following upon a prohibition of male homosexual behavior is a similar prohibition to women: “And let not women imitate the sexual role [literally, “marriage bed”] of men” (line 192). The author describes male homosexuality as a transgression of nature (line 190) that is not found in the animal world (line 191). The reader is warned not to let a son have long, braided or knotted hair, as long hair is for voluptuous women (lines 210–212). Further, beautiful boys are to be protected from homosexual advances and virgins kept locked up until their wedding day (lines 213–216). The sexual ethics presented in the poem are thus based on strict gender differentiation in dress and sexual role. Girls are to be kept fit for marriage and, once married, are not to stray outside the boundaries of marriage. A woman having sexual relations with another woman is viewed as imitating a man.7

Sifra, a rabbinical commentary on Leviticus composed of sayings from the tannaitic period (before ca. 220 C.E.), also discussed the issue:

Or: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt ... and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan” (Lev. 18:3). One could [interpret it as meaning] that they may not build buildings or plant plants like them. Therefore scripture teaches, “You shall not walk in their statutes” (Lev. 18:3) ... And what did they do? A man married a man and a woman a woman, and a man married a woman and her daughter, and a woman was married to two men.9

Thus we see that, in light of the lack of a biblical verse prohibiting sexual relations between women, another verse in Leviticus is taken as referring to such relations. This is not a specific negative commandment. Rather, the Egyptians and the Canaanites are described as practicing male homosexual and lesbian marriage, and the Israelites are forbidden to follow statutes that allow such things.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, the compilation and editing of which was completed around the fifth century C.E., there is reference to women having intercourse with each other, literally to “swinging back and forth” with each other.1 The text records a difference of opinion between two rabbinical schools of the first century on whether such intercourse made women unfit for the priesthood, that is, unfit to marry into the priesthood and to eat the priestly offerings. The background is that a priest may not marry a woman who has committed harlotry (Lev. 21:7), and the high priest must marry a virgin (Lev. 21:13). The question is whether sexual relations between women counts as intercourse, thereby making marriage to a priest forbidden. According to the text, the School of Shammai says that it does count, and the School of Hillel does not count sexual relations between women as making a woman unfit for marriage into the priesthood. Later Jewish sources also occasionally discuss the issue.5

In sum, the earliest Jewish sources (known to me) on sexual relations between women are from the Roman period. The emergent awareness of the issue may indicate increased openness on the part of women and possibly a greater frequency of sexual expression within female friendships, for anxiety about a phenomenon usually shows that it in fact exists. Paul’s inclusion of women fits in well with the Jewish concern developing at precisely his time.

Non-Jewish Authors

The earliest clear reference to female homoeroticism in Greek literature seems to be that in Plato’s Symposium.1 Aristophanes, in discussing on the origins of humanity, speaks of hetairistria, women who are attracted to women, as having their origin in primate beings consisting of two women joined together. This parallels the original creatures who were two men joined together and those who consisted of one woman and one man. Aristophanes imagines that each human being seeks a partner of the gender to which she or he was originally attached. In Plato’s last work, the Laws,6 he speaks of sexual relations between men and between women as “contrary to nature” (para physis), and adds that “the first who dared to do this acted through lack of self-control with respect to pleasure.”7 Thus, the passage in the Symposium presupposes that same-sex love is as natural and normal as heterosexual love, while that in the Laws does not. The reason for the discrepancy is unclear.

In the third century B.C.E., Asclepiades composed an epigram on two Samian women, Bitto and Nannion, who did not want to live in accordance with the laws of Aphrodite; instead, desiring sexual activities of which she would approve, they turned to other, “not beautiful” ones. Asclepiades calls upon Aphrodite to hate these
women, who are fleeing intercourse within her realm. An ancient commentator added as an explanatory note that he was accusing them of being tribades, which is the most common Greek term for women who engage in same-sex love.11

In the Latin literature of the early Empire, there are a number of references to a woman’s expressing her love for another woman sexually, and all of them are derogatory. Seneca the Elder (ca. 55 B.C.E. to 40 C.E.) composed one of his fictitious legal controversies around the case of a man who caught two tribades in bed, his wife and another woman, and killed them both. One declaimer describes the husband’s first reaction: “But I looked first at the man, to see whether he was natural or sewed-on.”12 Another declaimer notes that one would not tolerate the killing of a male adulterer under these circumstances, but adds that if he “had found a pseudo-adulterer...” The reader is left with the shock of the monstrosity, having been led to see that the husband’s act was justified.11

Ovid’s (43 B.C.E. to 18 C.E.) Metamorphoses contains the tale of two girls, Iphis and Ianthe, who loved each other and were engaged to marry.13 Because of her husband’s wish to have a boy, Iphis’s mother had raised her as a boy and concealed it from her husband. Iphis now bemoans her predicament, saying that the love she possesses is “unheard of,” and even “monstrous.” If the gods wished to destroy her, she bewails, they should have given her a “natural woe,” one “according to custom.” Among animals, females do not love females, she says, and, in her despair, she wishes she were no longer female. Iphis knows that she should accept herself as a woman and seek what is in accordance with divine law and love as a woman ought to love. And yet she loves Ianthe, though knowing that “nature does not will it, nature more powerful than all.”14 It is against the background of the tragedy of freakish circumstances—against divine will, against nature, against custom, unheard of—that the reader is relieved when Iris intervenes and changes Iphis into a boy, making the marriage possible.14

The poet Phaedrus (died mid 1st c. C.E.) composed a fable in which he describes the origin of tribades and passive homosexual men (molles mares) as an error on the part of Prometheus. For Prometheus, on returning intoxicated and sleepy from a dinner party, mistakenly placed female sexual organs on male bodies and male members on women. “Therefore lust now enjoys perverted pleasure.”15

Paul’s Views on the Nature of Women

Martial (ca. 40 to 103/104 C.E.) dedicated two epigrams to Philaesius, “tribad of the very tribads.”16 He depicts Philaesius as sexually aggressive toward both boys and girls, the latter of whom she, “quite fierce with the erection of a husband,” batters eleven in a day. She spends much time on athletics: handball, heavy juggling weights, wrestling. She engages in the pleasure of being whipped by a greasy teacher.17 Before dining she vomits seven portions of unmixed wine. After consuming sixteen meat dishes, she returns to the wine. “When, after all of these things, her mind turns back to sex, she does not engage in fellatio, which she thinks is not manly enough.”18 Instead she “devours girls’ middles.” Martial can only scorn the logic of this last act, for how could she consider cunnilingus manly? He also says of Philaesius “you rightly call the woman with whom you copulate a girlfriend.”

In a third epigram,19 Martial addresses one Bassa, a woman whom he had first thought to be as chaste as the famed Lucretia, for he had never seen Bassa coupling with men and had heard no scandals about her. On the contrary, she was always surrounded by women. But now he realizes that she was a fustator (f., “fucker”).20 Her “monstrous lust imitates a man.” That without a man there should be adultery is worthy of the Theban riddle.

In interpreting Martial one must be cautious. The vulgar and violent language and imagery we encounter here are not peculiar to these three epigrams, but are typical of Martial’s style. Of particular note is his precise imagery. A tribad is a woman who is trying to be like a man. Philaesius is unlimited in her sexual prowess, trying to win as many boys and girls as she can by her aggressive pursuits. The reference to what seems to be sadomasochistic pleasure at the hand of the trainer is designed to evoke special horror in the reader. Could it be that the voluntary submission to violence symbolizes Philaesius’s control even over violence toward herself? It appears here that a man’s violence toward a woman is a cultural outrage only when she allows such violence. By virtue of such autonomy, Philaesius has ceased to be a woman, as culturally defined, and has become a man. To Martial, it can then appear only ridiculous that she show interest in female genitalia. For how could anyone of sound mind consider cunnilingus (because it can be pleasurable to women?) virile? Thus, for all her carryings-on, Philaesius is not a real man after all. Martial generates a creative tension in the poems by exaggerating women’s attempts to be virile
Inmaculate and Powerful

and then exposing these attempts as ridiculous. But they are not simply laughable. Such behavior is dangerous, and therefore deserves the term monstrous.

Judith P. Hallett, in a very insightful paper entitled “Autonomy as Anomaly: Roman, and postclassical Greek, reactions to female homoerotic expression,” 26 suggests that Marital consciously portrays Philaenias as physically masculine, as physically capable of penile penetration (for example, of the boys). 21 She further notes that in the epigrams on Philaenias and elsewhere, Roman authors depict female homoeroticism as Greek and therefore distanced from their own reality. This occurs through such devices as the use of Greek 22 or Greek loanwords, of which there are a number in Marital’s epigrams on Philaenias. The word tribus itself is a Greek loanword and must have evoked a nuance of foreignness. Hallett’s hypothesis is this:

To some extent, therefore, this male preoccupation with physical masculinity, and particularly penis possession, as a necessary component of female sexual autonomy and homoeroticism, and this characterization of female sexual autonomy as distanced and non-Roman, seem to reflect an effort to describe such female behavior in symbolic language, as an imaginary super-deviation from the limits of prescribed female sexuality explicable to Roman males only in male terms. 28

Hallett argues that whereas Roman men passed beyond the passive sexual stage during which they could be penetrated by another male when they reached their early twenties, Roman women were to remain in the passive role throughout their adult lives. The easiest way to understand women’s rejection of the passive sexual role was to imagine that they, like the men, had passed on to the next stage, which implied penetrating behavior.

Juvenal’s (ca. 67 c.e. to ?) Sixth Satire contains a reference to women who set down their litters at the ancient altar of Chastity in Rome: “and in turn they ride horseback, and what is more they throw with the moon as a witness.” 24 Elsewhere Juvenal has a woman, Laronia, contrast women with homosexual men, saying that among women “such an abominable specimen of conduct” will not be found. 25

Authors writing in Greek in the Roman period were also nearly always quite negative in their depictions of female homoeroticism.

The philosopher and biographer Plutarch (ca. 45 to ca. 120 c.e.) is an important exception. He describes boy-love in the Sparta of the legendary founder of the Spartan constitution, Lycurgus, in rather favorable terms as promoting the education of the youth. By way of side comment, Plutarch adds, “though this love was so approved among them that also the noble and good women loved the virgins; there was no jealous love in it.” 26 There is no mention that such love might be perverse or abominable. Nevertheless, we should not assume that Plutarch’s admiration of ancient Spartan customs meant that he would have accepted love relations between women, or female sexual autonomy, in his own day. 27

The references to female homoeroticism in Greek authors of the second century c.e. and beyond represent a continuation of the motifs outlined thus far. The novelist Iamblichus (after 100 to ?) characterizes the love of Berenice, the daughter of the king of Egypt, for Mesopotamia, with whom she slept, as “wild and lawless amours.” 28 In his Dialogues of the Courtesans, the second-century author Lucian devotes the fifth dialogue to an experience that Leaena has had with her fellow courtesans Megilla and Demonassa. Megilla, a wealthy woman from Lesbos, has succeeded in seducing Leaena, in spite of Leaena’s shame at the strange activity. It turns out that Megilla sees her true self as Megillus and Demonassa as her wife. She wears a wig to conceal her short hair and says that although she does not have a male organ, she does have some sort of substitute. Leaena refuses to describe the exact nature of the sexual encounter, since it is too “shameful.” 29 Also cast in the dialogue form is the Amores by Pseudo-Lucian (probably early 4th cent.) in which one of the discussants speaks of “tribadic licentiousness,” and describes female homoeroticism as women behaving like men. 30

In his treatise on dream interpretation, the second-century author Artemidorus mentions dreams in which one woman sexually possesses another. 31 The second-century treatises On Chronic Diseases and On Acute Diseases by Soranus are only available to us in the Latin translation by the African medical writer Caelius Aurelianus (5th cent.). Here we read of the disease of the tribades, so called because of their interest in both kinds of love, although they prefer women, whom they pursue with a jealousy that is almost masculine. 32

A number of ancient astrologers mention sexual relations be-
between women, which they see as a disorder caused by the stars and the planets. Ptolemy (2d cent.) writes of *tribades* who are "lustful of sexual intercourse contrary to nature," who "perform the deeds of men," and who sometimes even designate their partners as "lawful wives." Elsewhere he speaks of *tribades* as "castrated (men)." 33 Vettius Valens (mid 2d cent.) speaks of *tribades* who are "licentious, servile, perpetrators of filth." 34 Manetho (probably 4th cent.) refers to *tribades* as ones who "perform deeds after the manner of men." 35

In sum, most of the writers discussed do not seem to find a place for female homoeroticism within the realm of the lawful and natural, although the Aristophanes of Plato’s Symposium and Plutarch in describing the Sparta of Lycurgus do represent another view. Among the other authors there is a strong tendency to depict *tribades* as like men, or trying to be like men (Seneca the Elder, Martial, Phaedrus, Lucian, Pseudo-Lucian, Caelius Aurelianus in his translation of Soranus, Ptolemy, Manetho, Firmicus Maternus, and possibly Artemidorus). The real issue may be that of women overstepping the bounds of the female, passive role assigned to them in Greco-Roman culture. The underlying issue would then be female sexual autonomy. If this is indeed the real issue, it would explain why Martial, for example, associates assertive sexual behavior toward males with the *tribas* Philaenias. 36 Lucian and Ptolemy speak of the women calling their partners wives. 37 The authors in question describe female homoeroticism as against the laws of Aphrodite and not beautiful. (Aischyliades), monstrous (Ovid, Martial), unnatural (Plato, Ovid, Ptolemy, by implication Seneca the Elder), shameful (Lucian), and lawless (Iamblichus). According to Caelius Aurelianus’s translation of Soranus, homoeroticism was a disease of the mind, to be treated by controlling the mind; in Phaedrus’s view it was the result of a divine error; and in the astrologers’ view, it was caused by the stars and the planets.

**Other Sources**

Two Greek vase paintings that document erotic attraction between women should be mentioned here, even though they are from an earlier period. A plate dating to circa 620 B.C.E. from the Greek island Thera depicts two women, of approximately equal height, in a typical courting position; that is, one is placing her hand below the chin of the other. 38 An Attic red-figure vase (ca. 500 B.C.E.) shows one woman caressing the elitoris of another. 39 We cannot exclude the possibility that the second vase was used for male titration; the vase was a *kylix,* a drinking vessel for wine. But this could hardly be the case with the first, since both women are fully clothed; in the second they are nude. Neither vase depicts the women as in any way masculine or pseudomasculine, and they differ from the Greek vases showing male couples, nearly all of which consist of a bearded adult and a beardless youth. 40 Also relevant is the image of the poet Sappho in the Roman period. The earliest Sappho biography (P.Oxy. 1800, fr. 1, 2d to 3d cent.) notes, “She has been accused by some of immorality and of being a lover of women.” Horace, in commenting on her verse technique, calls her “masculine Sappho,” but this may not be a reference to her sexuality. 41 Both Plutarch 42 and Maximus of Tyre 43 compared her with Socrates, who was known for his preference for men. Ovid writes that she loved girls and takes up the legend that she fell in love with a man, Phaon, who did not love her in return, a story that is possibly a reaction to the image of Sappho as one who loved women. 44 On the Christian side, the second-century writer Tatian describes Sappho as a *hetaira* and as a “love-crazed harlot of a woman, who sang her own licentiousness.” 45 The context is a list of disparaging remarks concerning fourteen Greek women writers, the works of nearly all of whom are lost to us. According to the *Suda,* a medieval lexicon that contains many earlier traditions, Sappho was accused by some of “shameful love” for women. 46 Thus, beginning in the Roman period there is an increasing preoccupation with Sappho’s love for women, usually combined with disapproval of that love. This fits in well with the broader development noted thus far for the Roman period: an increased attention to and vehement rejection of sexual relations between women.

**Paul’s Views on the Nature of Women**

In Romans 1:18–32, Paul describes a series of tragic exchanges. 47 Human beings, though they had the opportunity to recognize God through God’s created works, exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped images resembling those same created works. As a result of this fundamental disorder and confusion in human be-
Inmaculate and Powerful

ings' relation to God and to God's creation, other exchanges occurred: God handed them over to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies (verse 24); God handed them over to dishonorable passions (verse 26); God handed them over to an unapproved intellect and unfitting conduct (verse 28). The disorder and confusion that are idolatry are repeated in the disorder and confusion of same-sex love (verses 26–27) and of other forms of unfitting behavior (verses 29–32).

We have seen that the motif of the tribas becoming, being, or trying to be like a man recurs throughout the discussion of tribades in the literature of the Greco-Roman world. Tribades are women who cross the boundary of their femaleness as it is culturally defined. They are an anomaly, for they fit neither the proper category of female nor that of male. The structure and terminology of Romans 1:18-32 and of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 show that Paul was deeply concerned that what he saw to be the order of creation be maintained with respect to sex roles and gender polarity. Like other ancient authors who discuss tribades, Paul saw female homoeroticism as an improper crossing of boundaries, a blurring of the categories of male and female.

Impurity in Romans 1:24

The insights of anthropology can help us understand the complex concept of impurity. Mary Douglas argues that one must study purity laws in a systematic way. With respect to ancient Israel, she writes:

The purity laws of the Bible set up the great inclusive categories in which the whole universe is hierarchized and structured. Access to their meaning comes by mapping the same basic set of rules from one context on to another.

There is a symmetry among the classifications for animals, peoples, sacrificial victims, priests, and women. According to Douglas, the underlying principle of cleanliness in animals (Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14) is that they shall conform fully to their class. Those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world.

These considerations are of help in interpreting the concept of impurity in Romans 1:24.

Paul's Views on the Nature of Women

The exchange of natural relations for those contrary to nature in verses 26–27 is a concretization of the "impurity, to the dishonor of their bodies," described in verse 24. Thus, same-sex love constitutes impurity and a dishonoring of one's body. The categories of classification, namely, "male" and "female," are now no longer clear. Sexual intercourse with a member of the opposite sex implies clarity of sex roles; with a member of one's own, confusion. The biological male could become like a female, as culturally defined, and the biological female—could she become like a male? A class is created that "confounds the general scheme of the world.

This crossing of gender-role boundaries is one clear point of contingency between female and male same-sex love. Paul's contemporary, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, writes of male homosexuality:

In former days the very mention of it was a great disgrace, but now it is a matter of boasting not only to the active but to the passive partners, who habituate themselves to endure the disease of effeminization, let both body and soul run to waste, and leave no ember of their male sex-nature to smoulder. Mark how inconspicuously they braid and adorn the hair of their heads, and how they scrub and paint their faces with cosmetics and pigments and the like, and smother themselves with fragrant unguents. For of all such embellishments, used by all who deck themselves out to wear a comely appearance, fragrance is the most seductive. In fact the transformation of the male nature to the female is practised by them as an art and does not raise a blush. These persons are rightly judged worthy of death by those who obey the law, which ordains that the man-woman who debases the sterling coin of nature should perish unavenged, suffered not to live for a day or even an hour, as a disgrace to himself, his house, his native land, and the whole human race. And the lover of such may be assured that he is subject to the same penalty. He pursues an unnatural pleasure and does his best to render cities desolate and uninhabited by destroying the means of procreation. Furthermore he sees no harm in becoming a tutor and instructor in the grievous vices of unmanliness and effeminacy....

Philo's presupposition that sexual intercourse implies an active and a passive partner (normally a man and a woman), his view that passive male homosexuals become like women, in fact are afflicted with the disease of effeminacy, and his abhorrence of
cross-dressing are not untypical of ancient condemnations of male homosexuality.24 Both Paul and Philo disapprove of male homosexuality; both use the term para phusin, “unnatural” or “contrary to nature”,25 both reject men wearing hair styles also worn by women (see 1 Cor. 11:2–16); and both imagine physical recompense for male homosexual behavior. Further, as Diaspora Jews, both lived with the conflict between the open male homosexuality around them and the Levitical prohibition thereof.

Underlying Philo’s words is disgust, and even horror, at the ambiguous, anomalous being created by male homosexuality. This fits in well with the understanding of the impure as that which does not conform fully to its class.

For Paul, the opposite of impurity is righteousness (Rom. 6:19) or holiness (1 Thess. 4:7; 1 Cor. 7:14). According to Mary Douglas, “Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.” 56 In 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8 it is holiness that separates Christians from “the gentiles who do not know God.” Holiness implies abstention from forbidden sexual intercourse, that each man should “take a wife [literally, “vessel”] for himself in holiness and honor” (RSV, 1 Thess. 4:4).57 Here holiness defines Christians as separate from the outside world, and is manifest by maintaining the proper boundaries within the realm of sexuality.

In Romans 1:24–27, dishonesty and shame are closely related to impurity. Bruce Malina, in applying anthropological categories to New Testament studies, writes:

From a symbolic point of view, honor stands for a person’s rightful place in society, his social standing. This honor place is marked off by boundaries consisting of power, sexual status, and position on the social ladder. From a structuralist functionalist point of view, honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes plus the value of that person in the eyes of his or her social group.58

The “dishonoring their bodies among themselves” (verse 24) and the “dishonorable passions” (verse 26) would then mean that those engaged in same-sex love no longer occupy their rightful place in society. Malina contends that honor is not the same for women and men.26 In the passage at hand, the men have relinquished the honor due their sex. “Their women”—note the sub-

Paul’s Views on the Nature of Women

ordinating, relativizing word their—have not maintained the shame due their sex,26 and have departed from their proper sexual role. Thus, having crossed the boundaries delineating their respective social positions, their positions in the order of creation, they live in impurity and dishonesty. In contrast, a Christian man who respects these boundaries will take for himself a wife in “holiness and honor” (1 Thess. 4:4–8).

It is not an accident that same-sex love is underscored in Romans 1:24–27 as a repetition of the pattern of exchange found in idolatry. Idolaters, that is, followers of all the Greco-Roman religions except Judaism, exist totally outside the realm of holiness. It is therefore clear that a complete confusion of categories, or impurity, should exist among them. The confusion of maleness and femaleness stands for fundamental “symbolic confusion.” 58 That Paul saw sexual purity to be more basic than, for example, the cleanliness and uncanniness of foods is evident in his statement that the terms clean and unclean do not apply to foods (Rom. 14:20–21; cf. 1 Cor. 8, 10; Gal. 2:11–14) while he continued to apply the classification system of impurity and holiness to sexuality (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1–13, 7:14; 1 Thess. 4:3–8).

Romans 1:26 and 1 Corinthians 11:2–16

In 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 Paul is addressing himself to a concrete conflict in a community founded by himself, one that he knows well, whereas Romans 1:26–27 is meant for a community not founded by him and is in the context of a discourse on universal human sinfulness. In spite of the differing contexts, 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 helps us to see why Paul describes same-sex love as “impurity” and as the “dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” He sees a blurring of the distinction between the sexes as contrary to nature and against the hierarchy: God, Christ, man, woman.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (RSV) reads: 62

2 I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, 5 but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head—it is the same as if her head were
shaven. 6 For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil. 7 For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels. 11 (Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; 12 for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.) 13 Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him, 15 but if a woman has long hair, it is her pride? For her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 If any one is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God.

In this passage Paul requires strict gender differentiation with respect to hair style and headaddress. Women and men should not look the same. For Paul, this is a theological issue. The reasons for gender polarization in dress are that the man is the head of the woman, just as the head of the man is Christ and the head of Christ is God; that woman is the glory of man, while the man is the image and glory of God; and that woman was created from man and for him. There is a difference between woman and man, a difference that implies woman is to be oriented to her head, to man, in whom she has her origin. (Paul’s concessive remarks in verses 11 and 12 do not alter this basic structure.) The boundaries between female- ness and maleness are not to be blurred by women cutting their hair short or men wearing it long. Nor is long hair on women sufficient to mark the difference; women require a veil as a visible sign of their place in the order of creation.

As in Romans 1:26–27, Paul appeals to nature: Nature teaches that for a man to wear long hair is a “dishonor” (atimiais [RSV] “degrading”) to him (while for a woman it is “shameful,” atischron, to wear short hair, and an unveiled woman “dishonors,” katachronynei, her head). Thus, nature is the basis for strict gender differentiation in dress. For a man to defy nature means a loss of honor; that is, he no longer occupies his rightful place in society.

This discussion of headaddress and hair style is quite reminiscent of the ancient discussions of same-sex love. For the man, the fear is that by looking like a woman a man loses his masculinity and can sink to the level of a woman. Short hair on a woman is one of the signs of her becoming like, or trying to become like, a man. One thinks of the Megilla/Megillus of Lucian, who pulls off her wig to reveal short hair and announces herself to be Demophon’s husband. A woman cannot sink to the level of a man. She can only make ridiculous, yet nevertheless threatening, attempts to rise to that level.

Several exegetes have recognized that same-sex love could be an issue in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Early church discussions on same-sex love often included reference to the passage. In the nineteenth century, Johannes Weiss wrote that the woman who shaved her head was trying to look like a man for lascivious reasons, that the “lesbian vice” of perverse women was at stake here. The most recent scholar to see such a connection is Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, who detects in the Corinthian behavior a response to Galatians 3:28:

If there was no longer any male or female, the Corinthians felt free to blur the distinction between the sexes. . . . The consistent infantilism of the Corinthians rubbed him on the raw, and the hair-dos raised the disquieting question of homosexuality within the community.

Paul and Female Nonsubordination

Paul is not simply opposed to nonsubordination of the female. By recommending celibacy to women (1 Cor. 7:8–9, 25–35, 39–40) he actually promotes women as anomalies, as not directly subordinate to a husband. Furthermore, by quoting the baptismal formula, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (RSV, Gal. 3:28), he is opening the way for a blurring of gender roles that could alter social structures. That the slogan was powerful is evident, for he quotes a different version of the formula, one without the “male and female” portion, in 1 Corinthians 12:13, probably because he recognizes that the Corinthians had indeed understood the implications of the phrase “not male and female.” Paul acknowledges the work of women in the gospel (Rom. 16:1–16; Phil. 4:2–3), as well as women’s right to prophesy in the liturgical assembly (1 Cor. 11:5). If the admonition to
women to be silent in the churches and subordinate is by Paul (1 Cor. 14:33b–36) and not a later interpolator, it would be a further example of the already documented tension in his thinking. Thus, any ambiguity about gender roles in the Christian community resulted at least partly from Paul himself. But when pressed, as in the case of gender differentiation in appearance in Corinth, he calls for strict differentiation and bases it on a hierarchical ordering of the sexes, at the same time omitting the “not male and female” phrase that apparently endangered established gender roles. Perhaps it was precisely Paul’s promotion of celibacy, itself a potential threat to patriarchal marriage, that caused him to be so adamant about gender polarization, implying female subordination, in dress and in sexual intercourse. Against the belief of the end being near and Christ being the head of both man and woman, Paul could allow a woman to devote herself solely to Christ, thereby circumventing a male head in the form of a spouse. What he could not accept was women experiencing their power through the erotic in a way that challenged the hierarchical ladder: God, Christ, man, woman.  

Conclusions and Implications

This brief survey of sources has demonstrated that little tolerance for sexual love relationships between women can be found among male Greco-Roman writers. This is different from the recorded attitudes toward male homosexuality, which are quite mixed. The sources reviewed should teach us that it is methodologically questionable to subsume love relations between women under male homosexuality, as the following examples show, John Boswell, from whom I have learned much in spite of our differing interpretations, summarizes his findings on Roman society:

...intolerance on this issue was rare to the point of insignificance in its great urban centers. Gay people were in a strict sense a minority, but neither they nor their contemporaries regarded their inclinations as harmful, bizarre, immoral or threatening, and they were fully integrated into Roman life at every level.  

Robin Scroggs, upon completion of a survey of ancient sources on male homosexuality, writes:

Thus what the New Testament was against was the image of homosexuality as pederosis and primarily here its more worldly and dehumanizing dimensions [such as lack of mutuality]. One would regret it if somebody in the New Testament had not opposed such dehumanization.  

Scroggs specifically notes that he is speaking here only of male homosexuality. His discussion of women occurs in a four-and-one-half-page appendix entitled “Female Homosexuality in the Greco-Roman World.”  

Boswell and Scroggs, drawing upon the same sources, come to radically different conclusions. Boswell claims that his thesis applies to women; Scroggs does not. What is clear is that the conclusions of neither apply to women. The Roman authors surveyed did regard sexual relations between women as harmful, bizarre, immoral, and threatening. And one would be hard pressed to say that the authors discussed disapproved of women giving sexual expression to their affection for one another because it was dehumanizing by being, for example, nonmutual. On the contrary, hierarchy seemed normal to the authors discussed; what was abnormal was women not submitting to it. There is no good reason for Scroggs not to have asked why the sources on women do not support his thesis on men.

It should be noted that what I have been discussing is not lesbian history, that is, the history of women who found their primary identification in other women and who may or may not have expressed that sexually. Rather, I have been treating sources that attest to male attitudes toward, and male fantasies about, lesbians, and the men writing are heavily genitally oriented. These male attitudes are important for women’s history insofar as they shaped the culture in which women lived. The extent of that determination remains to be established. The conclusions for women’s history can only be tentative and general. The increasing preoccupation with sexual relations between women in the Roman period could indicate that lesbians were living more openly and were perceived as a greater threat. Two ways of dealing with the lesbian threat are utter silence and vehement rejection, whereby a sudden shift in method is not unusual. The sources surveyed seem to represent such a shift from silence to open rejection, although marginalization and contain-
ment through the technique of silence continued throughout the period discussed.

One must be clear about the significance of these sources for Paul, and not assume that Paul personally knew or read any of the sources discussed. Indeed, some were written after the Letter to the Romans. The sources are relevant because their broad variety documents attitudes that were most likely known to him and his readers. In light of widespread disapproval of female homoeroticism, Paul’s condemnation is not surprising, nor is his use of the expression para phusin, “unnatural” or “contrary to nature.” The motif of a woman becoming or trying to become like a man was most probably known to him, as well as men’s association of female homoerotic activity with sexual aggressiveness and licentiousness, which may be a way of describing—in caricature—female sexual autonomy. Further, it may not be an accident that Paul takes up this question in his Letter to the Romans. In the decades surrounding that letter, several authors who had been trained or lived in Rome (Seneca the Elder, Ovid, Martial, Phaedrus) expressed themselves on the matter, as did Juvenal (Rome) and Soranus (Rome and Alexandria, according to the fifth-century translation) in the early second century. This geographical clustering results partly from the high level of literary productivity in Rome in this period, but may also indicate a special concern with this issue in the city of Rome.

According to the sources, Paul and his culture understood maleness and femaleness hierarchically. The structures of Paul’s culture were based on a hierarchical definition of maleness and femaleness, a definition that found an acute expression in the rejection of physically intimate love relations between women and in the accompanying requirement of gender polarity in physical appearance. It is this definition that is behind Paul’s condemnation of female homoeroticism. Therefore this issue cannot be dismissed as a marginal question affecting only a small number of women. Anyone concerned about the human costs of a definition of women and men based on enforced polarity and hierarchy must take on the issue of the Christian rejection of lesbian existence, as well as that of male homosexuality, for which Paul is a primary source.

The churches and theology have the task of thinking through the implications of the fact that Romans 1:26 cannot be extricated from its immediate context or from Pauline thinking about women and men. In Paul’s eyes a woman who physically expressed love for another woman was repeating the pattern of idolatry, that is, of estrangement from God. It is inconsistent to call for equality between the sexes and yet to require that women either orient themselves toward men or remain celibate. Consistency would also require that if one declares Romans 1:26 (and 27) not to be normative for theology, one cannot adopt the rest of Pauline theology and theological anthropology. Therefore, a careful analysis and fundamental rethinking of Paul’s theology is required. Since Paul’s thought has deeply affected Western society, this is a task for everyone, not just for Christians.

Notes
2. Were line 192 not in its present context, it could also refer to a woman imitating a man sexually in another way, such as by taking the sexually active role in heterosexual intercourse. Disapproval of lesbians and disapproval of nonpassive heterosexual women are not unrelated to each other, as will be seen below.
5. Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 65a–b; Yehomat 76a (see the medieval commentator Rashi on both passages); Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Issurei Bi’ah (Forbidden Intercourse) 21:8; ‘Even Ha’Ezer 20.2.
7. 191E.
8. 636B–C.

9. John Boswell points out the possible ambiguity of the phrase *paraphrasis*, but does not address himself to the expressions ?"daring or shameless act" or "lack of self-control." See his Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 13–14, n. 22.


11. Controversiae 1.2.23.


14. The story of Caenis/Caeneus, a woman with no interest in sexual intercourse with men who was changed into a man, should also be mentioned here. Ovid is one of the main sources for the tale: Metamorphoses 12.171–515.

15. Phaedrus, Liber Fabularum 4.16. Phaedrus probably composed the fables of book 4 when he was an old man. See Peter L. Schmidt, Der Kleine Pauky, s.v. "Phaedrus." Note that actual physical organs are involved. Does the author consider them necessary for the female to play the active role in sexual intercourse?

16. Epigrammata 7.67, 70. A woman named Philisens was known in the Greek-speaking world as the author of a book on sexual positions, although some considered the attribution of the work to her to be malicious. See Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft 19, 2 (1938), p. 2122. Martial may have had this association in mind.


19. The verb *juno* used in line 2 of 7.70, which I have translated as "copoliate," is from the same root. Both refer to men's copulating with women.


21. Peter Howell also sees Martial as envisaging physical penetration in 1.90 (Bassus) and 7.67 (Philisens). He notes that some women are said to have a clitoris large enough to "be able to copulate, or even sodomize," but sees it as more likely that the use of an artificial phallus is meant. See Howell, A Commentary on Book One of the Epigrams of Martial (London: Athlone Press, 1980), p. 298. Phaedrus's description of tribules possessing actual male organs would also support Hall's interpretation, especially since Martial knew and used the work of Phaedrus. See Schmidt, Der Kleine Pauky, s.v. "Phaedrus."

22. See Seneca, Controversiae 1.2.23.


25. Juvenal, Satires 2.43–48. Laronia does not necessarily represent Juvenal's view, and it seems nearly certain that he is referring to sexual activity among the women mentioned at 6.306–313.


28. This fragment of Iamblichus, Babyloniae, was preserved in the Bibliotheca of the tenth-century patriarch Photius. See René Henry, ed. and trans., Photius: Bibliothèque, 8 vols. (Paris: "Les Belles Lettres," 1959–77), vol. 2, pp. 44–46. See also the critical edition of the fragments of Iamblichus by Elmar Habrich (Leipzig: Teubner, 1960), pp. 58–65, and the discussion in Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, p. 84. Boswell's translation of *ekthesmos* as "inordinate" rather than "lawless" or "contre nature" (Henry) is not supported by the evidence; see the references for *ekthesmos* in the standard Greek lexica: Liddell-Scott-Jones, Lampe, and Preissig.

29. See also Alciphron (2d cent.), Letters of Ctesias, 14, which contains an account of an all-female party with erotic overtones.


31. Onicerocritica 1.80.

32. Tardearum passionum 4.9.132–133.

33. Tetrabiblos 3.14; 4.5.

34. Anthologiarum Libri 2.36.
35. Apollonius of Tyana, I. 42. See also the fourth-century Latin writer Firmicus Maternus, who, in his systematic work on astrology, repeats the motif of women becoming like men (Mattheus 7.25).

36. See also Pausanias, Panathenaicus 4.9.132 ("women who are called tribades because they perform both kinds of love").

37. A third second-century author who speaks of women is the Christian Clement of Alexandria: "Men passively play the role of women, and women behave like men in that women, contrary to nature, are given in marriage and marry" (Pseudo-Logoi 2.22).


39. Dover, Greek Homosexuality, R207, discussion on p. 173; John Boardman, Eugenio La Roeca, and Antonia Munas, Eros in Griechenland (Munich: List, 1976), pp. 111-112; J. D. Beasley, Paralipomena: Additions to Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painters and Attic Red-Figure Vase-Painters 2 ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 333.


41. Epistle 1. 19. 28. See also Horace's reference to Folia of Ariminum, to whom he attributes "masculine libido," in Epod 5.41-46.

42. Moralia 406 A.

43. 18. 7.

44. Tristia 2.365-366; Heroides [XV]; cf. also Ovid, Metamorphoses 9.666-797.

45. Oretio ad Graecos 33.


48. My primary reason for interpreting verse 26 as referring to same-sex love, and not to another form of sexual behavior that Paul would call unnatural, is the word likewise of verse 27, which clearly refers to male homosexuality. If it were to refer to women taking the active role in heterosexual intercourse, the interpretation that follows would still hold. There does not seem to me to be sufficient basis for taking it to refer to oral or anal intercourse.


51. Purity and Danger, p. 55.

52. For this interpretation see Ulrich Wilckens, Der Brief an die Römer (EKK 6.1-3 (Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen, 1978-82), vol. 1, p. 109, and others.


56. Purity and Danger, p. 53.
60. In commenting on Romans 1:26, John Chrysostom writes that it is “more disgraceful that the women should seek this type of intercourse, since they ought to have a greater sense of shame than men” (PG 60.417).
62. It is not possible to discuss here the complex exegetical issues of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 (such as the meaning of kephalai or the reasons for believing that the passage has something to do with veiling). For a different interpretation, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroads, 1983), pp. 46, 226–230, 239–240; see also the literature cited there.
63. Note that Lucian is a second-century author and therefore later than Paul. See also Lucian, Fugitiviti 27.
64. For several of these references, see Bernadette J. Brooten, “Patristic Interpretations of Romans 1:26,” in Elizabeth A. Livingstone, ed., Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on Patristic Studies (forthcoming).
68. Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, p. 87. It is important to underscore the great value of Boxwell’s book; he includes sources that do not support his thesis, which is one of the marks of good scholarship.
70. Ibid., pp. 140–144.