PATRISTIC INTERPRETATIONS
OF ROMANS 1:26*

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Rom 1:26 occurs in the context of Paul’s discussion of idolatry (Rom 1:18-32). According to Paul, idol worship had serious consequences. Rom 1:24-27 reads (RSV):

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 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.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural (οἱ τε γυναῖκες άντρας μετηλλαξάν τὴν φυσικὴν χρήσιν ἕξις τῆς παρὰ φύσιν), and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

This is the only passage in the entire Bible referring explicitly to lesbians. Ancient Israelite law forbade male homosexual relations, but did not make reference to women (Lev 18:22, 20:13).

Interpretations of Rom 1:26 occur only rarely in the patristic sources. When the verse is quoted at all, it is usually the first half, ‘God gave them up to dishonorable passions,’ which is quoted without comment (e.g., Origen often does this).1 The interpretations which do occur fall into two categories. According to the one, Paul is referring here, not to lesbians, but rather to unnatural heterosexual intercourse. According to the other lesbians are indeed meant. Anastasius and Augustine are examples of the unnatural heterosexual intercourse interpretation, while John Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria would be examples of the second category.

According to scholia found in two manuscripts of the Paedagogus of Clement of Alexandria, Anastasius interpreted the verse as follows: ‘Clearly they do not go into one another (οὐκ ἔναλλάσσοντες), but rather offer themselves to the men.’2 He thus seems to dispute the possibility of sexual relations between women at all. Augustine also took the verse as referring to unnatural heterosexual intercourse. For him unnatural

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means that which does not allow for procreation, such as anal intercourse: ‘But as regards any part of the body which is not meant for generative purposes, should a man use even his own wife in it, it is against nature and flagitious.’ Augustine sees sexual intercourse with a prostitute as less evil than nonprocreative forms of marital intercourse, because the former is at least not contrary to nature.

How is it possible to interpret the verse as not referring to sexual relations between women? It is the case that, with respect to the women, Paul speaks only of their having ‘exchanged natural relations for unnatural.’ Thus, one inclined to overlook the existence of lesbians could take vss. 26 and 27 as not parallel to each other, in spite of the ὁμοίοις, ‘similarly,’ of v. 27.

One should note, however, that Augustine does not totally dispute the possibility of love relations between women. In fact, he specifically warns nuns about lesbian existence: ‘The love which you bear to each other must be not carnal, but spiritual.’

According to the second category of interpretation, Rom 1:26 does refer to lesbians. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on Romans, writes that the women in question were without excuse, because they did have access to lawful intercourse, making unnecessary this ‘monstrous depravity.’ Chrysostom further notes 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.’ Thus, for Chrysostom, lesbian existence and male homosexuality are not parallel to each other, for women and men are not meant to be alike. The man was designed to be the teacher of the woman, the woman the helpmate of the man. Gender roles and a polarization of the sexes are essential to his interpretation of Rom 1:26–27. Homosexual men become, in essence, women and cease to be men or rather blur the differences between women and men. A similar concern with the blurring of gender role distinctions occurs in Chrysostom’s tracts on spiritual marriage.

Moving behind Chrysostom to an earlier historical stage, we find that Clement of Alexandria similarly devotes much greater attention to male homosexuality than to lesbian existence. Like Chrysostom, he is concerned that through homosexuality men become like women. Clement emphasizes that men’s hair and clothing should not resemble women’s hair and clothing. Men should wear a beard as a sign of their stronger nature and their right to rule. Women should be veiled and with covered faces. It is in the context of the necessity of gender differentiation with respect to clothing and hair that Clement discusses homosexuality: ‘men passively play the role of women, and women behave like men (ἐνδρικῶς) in that women, contrary to nature, are given in marriage and marry.’

Augustine is likewise concerned about gender distinction with respect to hair, writing that monks should not believe that celibacy means they are no longer men. Monks should avoid long hair, which could create the impression that they are available to be bought. Women should veil themselves, for woman, unlike man, does not through her body show that she is made in the image of God. Man is meant to rule and woman to be subordinate (illa regit, haec regit; illa dominatur, haec subditur).

To sum up thus far, neither those commentators who interpret Rom 1:26 as referring to heterosexual intercourse, nor those who take it as referring to lesbians interpret v. 26 (on women) as parallel to v. 27 (on men). This is in keeping with these authors’ view that the very deep differences between women and men which they posit must be preserved.

Patristic references to lesbians must be viewed in their Graeco-Roman context. References to lesbians in the Graeco-Roman world are relatively more numerous than in earlier periods, which could indicate that lesbians were living more openly than previously. For example, while the Hebrew Bible does not forbid lesbian existence, post-biblical Jewish writings do discuss whether it is forbidden: Pseudo-Phocylides (1st C. BC), the Tannaitic midrash Sifra and other rabbinic writings, and even the writer of epigrams (3rd C. BC). Seneca the Elder (1st C. BC), Martial (1st C.), possibly Juvenal (1st/2nd C.), Phaedrus (1st C.), Plutarch (1st C.), Lucian (2nd C.), Pseudo-Lucian (2nd C.), the mathematician Ptolemy (2nd C.), the astrolabe Vettius Valens (2nd C.), the astrologer Manetho (4th C.), the medical writer Aelianus (5th C.) and others also mention lesbians, usually in a derogatory fashion. This is different from discussions of male homosexuality in ancient sources, some of which are accepting and others of which are negative. It is this nearly thorough rejection of love between women in both ancient and non-Christian and Christian sources which causes me to question the thesis posed by John Boswell in Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality (Chicago, 1980) that a broad strand of tolerance of homosexuality existed in the early church. Boswell pays little attention to the sources on women, although he does quote a number of those which I have quoted to you and I have learned much from him. Nevertheless, I believe that his thesis does not apply to women and is therefore inaccurate.

The pre-Christian and Christian Sappho interpretation of the Hellenistic and Roman periods further confirms the general rejection of lesbian existence. The earliest Sappho biography, P. Oxy. 1800, fr. 2 (2nd/3rd C.), notes that, ‘She has been accused by some of immorality (ἐνταγέωσας τοις τρόποις) and of being a lover of women (γονακές τας τριτιάς).’ According to Horace she was *mascula Sappho*. But Plutarch and Maximus of Tyre compared her with Socrates, who was known for his preference for men. Ovid says that she loved girls and cast into poetic form the legend that she fell in love with a man, Phaon, who did not love her in return. According to the Suda, Sappho was accused by some of ‘shameful love’ (οίσχρα φιλιά) for women. Thus, beginning in the Roman period we find an increasing preoccupation with Sappho’s love for women, usually combined with disapproval of that love. Tatian describes Sappho as a ἠτάριος and as a ‘love-crazy harlot of a woman, who sang her own licentiousness’ (γύναικα παρθενίνας ἡρωμονομᾶς καὶ θυμάτης ἀσελγείαν ἄδει). The context is a list of disparaging remarks concerning fourteen Greek women writers, the works of nearly all of whom are lost to us. Tatian must have been familiar with the negative Sappho interpretation before him, which, in turn, may have arisen in reaction to women’s, possibly women poets’, appealing to Sappho. The Christian father’s rejection of lesbian existence may have contributed to Sappho’s poetry not being handed down, so that before the discovery of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, nearly all of it was lost to us.
Other scattered references to lesbians include two derogatory mentions by Ter-
utilian of\ frictrices,\ from frico, 'to rub,' probably parallel to the most common Greek\ word for lesbian, τρίπθα, from τρίβω, 'to rub.'

In sum, Christianity entered a world in which male writers were commenting
more frequently on lesbian existence than previously, nearly always negatively, which
is different from ancient discussions of male homosexuality. Similarly, patristic inter-
pretations of Rom 1:26 indicate that the authors in question did not view lesbian
existence as parallel to male homosexuality. Either they interpreted Rom 1:26 as not
referring to lesbians at all—denying that love relations between women are possible
is a strong motif in the history of writing about women's sexuality and women—or
they took it as referring to lesbians, but focused much greater attention on male
homosexuality. Male homosexuality has always received greater attention in the
literature, probably because men and men's sexuality are simply seen as more im-
portant. Clement, Chrysostom and Augustine are especially concerned about sharp
gender differentiation, of which clothing and hairstyle form important components.
They view a blurring of gender distinctions through clothing, hairstyle and same-sex
love as dangerous because it contradicts the natural, God-ordained hierarchy of
man over women. I would like to add that I find this connection between Rom 1:26–27
and 1 Cor 11:2–16 (on hairstyle, the hierarchical relationship between the sexes and
possibly veiling) to be helpful in understanding Paul, i.e., exegetically convincing.

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Notes

1. E.g., Origen, Comm. Lam. 45 (GCS 6: 255, 20-textual variant); Comm. Matt. 123 (GCS 41: 64); 212 (GCS 41: 102). It is not possible to discuss in this paper all of the patristic references to Rom 1:26. Among the more interesting of those not discussed are: Tertullian, De cor. 6. 1 (CC 2: 1046–47); Hippoly-
tus, Refutatio v. 7. 16–19 (GCS 26: 82.11–83.8), which deals with the Naasenes; Acta Thomaedi §55, ed.
R.A. Lipsius, M. Bonnet (Leipzig, 1903; repr.: Hildesheim, 1959), vol. 2, p. 172; Ambrosiaster, Ad
Rom. i. 26 (CSEL 81, 1: 51.1–15); Pseudo-Julian of Toledo, Ars grammatica, poética et rhetoricà 6. 49.
ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1992), pp. 31–32. I would like to express special appreciation to Prof.
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(Paris, 1975– ), ad loc.

2. PG 8: 501–2, n. 9; GCS 12: 331, 6–8.
5. In epist. ad Rom., Hom. 4 (PG 60: 417).