



CONTRARY TO NATURE?

ROMANS 1:24-32 AND THE PLACE OF SEXUAL PRACTICE IN PAUL'S ARGUMENT

In Romans 1-2 the apostle Paul voices a critique of both pagan sexual practice (1:26-27) and Jewish sexual practice (2:22). Although Paul is primarily targeting the hypocrisy of those who claim to follow Jewish Law, it's Paul's comments concerning same-sex sexual activity that has provoked most discussion.

Much of the disagreement centres around what Paul means when he speaks of those who exchange "natural" for "unnatural" same-sex sexual relationships. We'll come to these questions in a moment. Before addressing Paul's specific comments on same-sex sexual practice in Romans 1:24-32, it's worth first noting the primary aim of his argumentation over chapters 1-2.

1. THE FOCUS & FLOW OF PAUL'S WIDER ARGUMENT IN ROMANS 1:18-2:29

Paul's primary aim is to establish that both pagans and Jews **have precisely the same moral tendency**; a tendency to wilfully engage in even those things they themselves acknowledge as being displeasing to God. Paul is making the case that **simply knowing** God's will in greater depth (as Jews do) will do nothing to help people actually obey it! This is because, irrespective of how much they know, Jew and Gentile are equally under the power of sin (3:9)!

However much (or little) people know, ALL people universally show contempt toward God **by not doing** that which they know they should. This is **equally true** of the outright pagan who knows very little, the religiously pious, and even the Jewish expert in God's law (who imagines they know it all). We can sum up Paul's argument in the following 4 steps:

- i) Paul's central thesis: All people suppress whatever truth they know of God **by what they actually do** (1:18-20).
- ii) People treat with contempt whatever knowledge they do possess about God (21-31). And even those things they themselves DO acknowledge as evil, **they still choose to both DO and APPROVE of** (1:32)!
- iii) Of course there are religiously pious people (be they Jew or gentile) who are willing to stand up & judge the evil that they see around them, rather than to approve it (2:1-4). Some judge others on the basis of God's Law, or perhaps they judge others on the basis of some instinctive impulse of the conscience (2:12-15). Either way, even these pious folk who condemn the evil they see around them **still DO the very same things that they condemn** (2:1-18).
- iv) But what about those who are not just generally pious, but spiritually enlightened?! There are those Jewish teachers who imagine they're especially qualified to instruct the world in the intricacies of God's Law; "theological experts", so to speak (2:17-29). Yet even those with unparalleled knowledge and insight into God's word, **still ultimately DO the very same things that they instruct others to avoid.** ¹

¹ Paul is not simply addressing Jewish people in general in 2:17ff, but rather those who imagine that their deeper **knowledge** of God's Law enables them to guide the Gentiles in effective moral transformation via the Law. Lionel Windsor's published thesis on Romans 2:17-19 is summarised on his blog - [LINK](#)

Notice the common denominator for points ii, iii, and iv above. Irrespective of **how much people happen to know** of God's will (be it a little, or a lot) **no-one actually does the good** they know God expects of them. That is just as true for the most unenlightened pagan, as it is for the most theologically informed Jew!

PAUL'S PRIMARY ARGUMENT: Simply possessing a *greater familiarity* with God's decrees **has done nothing** to lessen the contempt people show towards God himself! Mere knowledge of God's will does nothing to lessen the contempt people show him!

2. THE PLACE OF HUMAN SEXUAL PRACTICE IN PAUL'S ARGUMENT

So, where do Paul's specific comments on sexual practice fit into the above broader argument? Perhaps we can begin with Paul's assessment of the self-styled Jewish "Law expert" of Romans 2:17-19.

- i) Although the expert Jewish instructor in God's law i) KNOWS that adultery is wrong, and
- ii) although they JUDGE adultery to be wrong, and
- iii) although they presume to INSTRUCT the world in adultery's "wrongness", even so, they themselves still commit adultery (2:22)! **They still choose to DO the very things they KNOW are unrighteous.**

The non-Jewish ancient world didn't know God or his righteous demands with the same specificity one might expect of a Jewish instructor in the Law. However, they DID know **something** of both God's character, and the evil tendencies of humanity (1:21, 23, and 32). As with the Jewish Law expert, they just choose not to act in accordance with whatever little they do happen to know!

The pagan world exchanged whatever meagre truth they KNEW about God, for a lie (1:25). And they also exchanged what they KNEW to be "natural" relations for what they themselves KNEW to be "unnatural" relations (1:26-27).

Let's pause here for a moment, and explore in greater detail what attitudes the ancient world actually held toward the behaviour described here in Romans 1:26-27. We'll need to grapple with some of the following questions:

- a) **What** exactly does "natural" and "unnatural" mean?
- b) **Who** understood the actions of Romans 1:26-27 to be "unnatural"?
- c) What precisely **was the nature** of these actions that were considered to be "unnatural"?

a) WHAT EXACTLY IS MEANT BY "UNNATURAL/NATURAL"?

Modern readers are likely to understand "natural" in terms of biological, genetic, or psychological normativity. That which doesn't commonly occur in a biological sense is "unnatural". This is why many people assume that modern "scientific findings" will ultimately disprove any claim about the "unnaturalness" of same-sex sexual attraction.²

However, neither the pagans nor Paul used the terminology of "natural/unnatural" in this reductively materialist sort of way. Theologian Michael Bird and ethicist Gordon Preece explain how both Paul and his pagan contemporaries would have understood this "natural/unnatural" terminology.³

"In Stoic philosophy the natural world is divine, so that *natura* was a virtual god, known by common instinct, and ingrained within the very fabric of one's own being. For the Stoics, natural law directs people to [embrace] what is natural and to reject what is contrary to nature. Virtue consists of acting in accordance with the law of nature..."

(For Christian theologians, the "natural" was that reality God reveals concerning one's bodily & ensouled character).⁴

Paul doesn't need to "preach at" or moralise the pagans at this point. Paul is just noting what pagans themselves had already acknowledged (Rom 1:32)! The pagan Greek world readily acknowledged that the behaviour Romans 1:26-27 describes was not in proper accord with what they considered to be the "divine nature" of reality. Paul's point is simply that the pagans (like the Jew of 2:17ff) consistently chooses to act against even that which they "know" to be right.

² Greek writers acknowledged & suggested various parallels to what we might speak of as a biological "orientation" (see *Does The Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?* by Preston Sprinkle, Chapter 6). However, this is not what they meant by the use of "natural/unnatural".

³ *Sexegesis*, 2012, Ed. Bird & Preece. "Paul's Jewish View of Sexuality In Romans 1:26-27", p.91-93.

⁴ *Church in Crisis*, by Oliver O'Donovan, "Creation, Redemption, and Nature", p86ff.

b) PAGANS THEMSELVES UNDERSTOOD THE ACTIONS OF ROMANS 1:26-27 AS "UNNATURAL".

Paul has no need (in Romans 1:26-27) to *establish* that pagan same-sex sexual activity is wrong, for even the pagans already acknowledge this (Rom 1:32)!

Same-sex relations **between women** were routinely condemned in the ancient world. For example Juvenal (in SATIRE 6.306-13) mocked the drunkenness of women that led to exchanging heterosexual sex for lesbian sex acts. We should acknowledge that there was likely a significant element of patriarchal and chauvinist "outrage" behind such pagan condemnations of lesbianism. Pagan men hypocritically assumed for themselves a degree of homoerotic sexual liberty that they'd never have countenanced extending to women!⁵

However male same-sex relationships were certainly not universally accepted either. The following examples (including several highlighted by Bird & Preece⁶) are illustrative.

- Both the greek philosophers Plato (in SYMPOSIUM 217-19) & Xenophon (in MEMORABILIA 2.1.32) explicitly condemned homosexual activity.
- As far back as 636BC the Greek philosopher Plato (in LAWS 1.2) had condemned same-sex actions as being "**contrary to nature**". He also notes that the pleasure that derives from man and woman in the course of procreation is in **accord with nature**, but **contrary to nature** when between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman (in Laws 636c).
- The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (HIST. 32.10.9.3) described homoerotic relationships as "**a marriage against nature**". Diodorus lived just before Jesus (60-30 BC)
- The Roman poet Ovid (in his METAMORPHOSES 9.758) describes a female character involved in same-sex sexual activity as confessing that "**nature does not will it**". Ovid lived 43 BC to 18 AD.
- The Roman historian Josephus wrote of "**the unnatural desire**" which makes men engage in sexual intercourse with one another. He also critiqued the sexual habits of the greek gods as an idolatrous & mythic excuse used to justify "**unnatural**" pleasures. Plato makes the same point (in Laws 636c) about the Cretans inventing the myth of Ganymede to justify paederasty (sexual activity between an adult man and a boy).

When Paul speaks in Romans 1:26-27 of women and men exchanging "**natural**" for "**unnatural**" relations, he's speaking of behaviour that pagans themselves routinely acknowledged as wrong, yet still chose to approve of & engage in anyway. This is precisely the same kind of moral hypocrisy Paul is preparing to accuse the Jewish law teacher of in 2:17-24.

To be clear. Paul is not using pagan morality to buttress biblical moral claims.

Paul is rather noting pagan claims about what is "natural" to establish the universal reality of pagan moral hypocrisy. He then goes on to point out that the Jew's deeper knowledge of God's will **does nothing** to spare them from being guilty of precisely the same kind of moral hypocrisy!

Paul's aim is to establish the transformative impotence of Jewish Law teaching.

Despite the evidence noted above for broad pagan critique of homoerotic behaviour, there are those who claim that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul is condemning ONLY ABUSIVE patterns of ancient same-sex sexual behaviour. Let's turn to now consider those claims.

⁵ *From Shame to Sin*, by Kyle Harper, p37ff and p52ff. Harper explores the reasons for the unequal representation of male and female sexuality in antiquity.

⁶ *Sexegesis*, 2012, Ed. Bird & Preece. "Paul's Jewish View of Sexuality In Romans 1:26-27", p.90-92.

c) WHAT WAS THE CHARACTER OF THE "UNNATURAL" ACTS NAMED IN ROMANS 1:26-27?

It's undeniable that many sexual relationships in the ancient world were less than consensual, if not outright exploitative and abusive! In the 1980-1990's it became increasingly common for scholars to suggest that loving, consensual, same-sex sexual relationships simply didn't exist in the ancient world and that Paul therefore only had in mind exploitative forms of homoerotic behaviour (paederasty, master-to-slave rape, prostitution etc.). Might this not open up the possibility that non-exploitative homoerotic relationships might possibly be acceptable?

Many of the following observations are presented in greater detail in Preston Sprinkle's recent book.⁷

Ancient Greek literature routinely specified various forms of exploitative sexual relationships using very specific terms.

- i) *erastes* & *eromenos* described respectively active/passive power differentials in sexual activity
- ii) *paiderastes* & *paidophthoros* were used to denote "lovers" or "corruptors" of boys

However, Paul never uses *any* of the terms usually employed to speak of specifically exploitative/abusive behaviours. Nor does Paul mention slaves/masters. What Paul does use is the mutual language of "one another", which hardly seems reflective of a one-way exploitative pattern of relating.

The mention of women exchanging "natural" sexual relations in v26 should also give us pause for thought. Unlike homoerotic relationships between elite men and boys/slaves, relationships between women did not typically exploit age or power differentials. Preston Sprinkle describes numerous examples from literature, art, and history of consensual homoerotic and romantic relationships between women. There seems to be no good reason to read abuse or exploitation into the activity Paul describes in vs26.

Consensual same-sex sexual activity between men of equal age/status was significantly *more taboo* than the practice of paederasty in antiquity.⁸ It's therefore little wonder that paederasty is spoken of far more openly than other patterns of same-sex sexual activity. However, this certainly does not mean that consensual same-sex sexual activity between men of equal age/status was unknown. As with his survey of consensual homoerotic practices between women, Sprinkle likewise notes many comparable examples of male homoerotic/romantic relationships in ancient literature. It is simply untrue to claim that "consensual/romantic" same-sex sexual activity did not exist in the ancient world. The comparatively frequent references to paederasty reflects the greater degree of toleration shown towards it, as it was considered far less of a threat to the state institution of marriage.

Furthermore, elsewhere in his writing Paul is not at all shy or hesitant in condemning exploitative male sexual behaviour directed towards women. If Paul's focus in Romans 1:26-27 is specifically exploitative sexual behaviour, why wouldn't he also condemn such abuse here (in Rom 1:26-27) as he does elsewhere.

There simply seems to be no justifiable reason for suggesting that Paul had in mind only (or mainly) exploitative sexual relationships in Romans 1:26-37. Increasingly, leading scholars of antiquity reject such a reading Paul. Even leading "affirming" scholars such as Laoder and Perriman clearly reject the idea that Paul limits his critique to non-consensual & abusive patterns of sexual expression.

⁷ *Does The Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?* by Preston Sprinkle. Chapter 4, "Paul Was Not Talking About Consensual Same-Sex Relationships". The title of this chapter reflects the objection that Preston is seeking to answer and respond to.

⁸ In the interests of protecting the institution of marriage, and one's own status, adult consensual same-sex activity and companionship could be gravely disproved of, even while being commonly embraced. *From Shame to Sin*, by Kyle Harper, p36-37.