

Romans 1:26-27 condemns the Cult of Isis, not Homosexuality

Robert Gnuse*

*The James C. Carter, S.J., Chase Bank Distinguished Professor of the Humanities, Loyola University
New Orleans 6363 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA*

***Corresponding Author:** *Robert Gnuse, The James C. Carter, S.J., Chase Bank Distinguished
Professor of the Humanities, Loyola University New Orleans 6363 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans,
LA 70118, USA*

ABSTRACT

Many conservative Christians condemn same sex relations, especially among women, by quoting Paul's statement in Roman 1:26-27. But this passage really condemns the Isis Cult practiced in Rome during Paul's age. The animals mentioned in Romans 1 correspond to the animal images of gods popular in the Isis cult, the unnatural sex practiced by the women refers to the behavior of Isis priestesses, and the immoral men refer to castrated male priests in the Isis cult. Love between two free, adult people in love is not condemned here by Paul.

INTRODUCTION

A close study of the biblical passage in Rom 1:26-27 is extremely significant in our contemporary age with the raging debate over gay rights and gay identity.

Conservative religionists condemn homosexual behavior and sometimes homosexual identity altogether, declaring it to be a perversion. They often quote the Bible to justify their viewpoints. The most commonly quoted passage in this regard is a statement by Paul in Roman 1:26-27. Even for those people in our society who are not religious and do not care what the Bible says, it is necessary to be aware of this passage because so many conservative spokespersons appeal to it.

A conservative critic of homosexual behavior once said to me, "If all other biblical passages can be shown to be irrelevant to the homosexual debate, at least I have one certain biblical text that clearly condemns homosexuality." He, of course, was referring to Rom 1:26-27. This passage has been used for years to condemn both male and female homosexual behavior. Conservatives have declared that it is the clearest condemnation of such sexual behavior that you can read in the Bible.

I believe, however, that people are not reading the passage clearly, nor are they reading it in its larger context. I will reproduce Rom 1:22-27, for I believe we need the entire context to see what Paul is really saying. Rom 1:22-27 reads, 22"Claiming to be wise, they became fools;

23and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

24Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 25because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 27and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

The opponent of homosexuality quotes the last two verses and declares that here we have a clear condemnation of both male and female homosexuality. I would respond by saying we must observe how verse 26 begins. The words are "for this reason." That initial statement means that the gay behavior is the result of the idolatry described in the previous verses. In other words, the idolatry and the gay behavior go together and describe the same people. Sophisticated critics of gay behavior do indeed observe this also. They observe that Paul believed idolatry in general to be the root sin that could lead to sexual perversions, including homosexuality, and their discussion ends there. But the point I wish to make is that Paul is not

speaking about all homosexuals, he is speaking about a specific group of homosexuals who engage in a particular form of idolatrous worship, not just general idolatry.

The idolatry that is described is the theriomorphic representation of God or the gods. Theriomorphic means representing something in the form of an animal. Paul says that this group of people portrays God or their gods as animals: as birds, four-footed animals, or reptiles in verse 23. He repeats the notion again in verse 25 when he says that they worship the creature. Then in verse 26 Paul says that because of this worship activity these people are given over to homoerotic behavior. In particular, he notes that the men “give up” natural heterosexual love for homosexual love. Who is Paul describing?

The only group of people in the Mediterranean world who portrayed their gods as animals were the Egyptians. In Rome the significant imported Egyptian cult was the worship of the goddess Isis. A history of how the Isis cult spread through the Roman Empire may be found in Robert Turcan (75-104). Isis was portrayed as a human female, but her son Horus was portrayed as a falcon. Other accompanying Egyptian deities were portrayed as an ibis (Thoth), a cow (Hathor sometimes), a lioness (Tefnut), a ram (Khnum), a hippopotamus (Tawaret and Seth sometimes), a cat (Bastet), a jackal or dog (Anubis), a crocodile (Sobek), a beetle (Khepri), etc. Isis could also be merged with Hathor in the piety of the devout, and Anubis was a special companion of Isis (Witt 124-25; Solomon 56-57, 198-209). Isis was called the “queen of heaven” in Egypt after the rule of Ptolemy I (300 BCE), and she was portrayed as a gracious mother to Horus and a deity who loved humanity. In this list we might notice Paul’s references to a human figure (Isis), a bird (Horus), and a four-footed animal (Hathor), three deities most popular in the Isis cult.

In the public and very flamboyant cultic processions at Rome, Isis priests carried images of animal-faced gods and other unusual objects, including a golden urn with sacred water from the Nile. They would also wear costumes of these particular deities. Lucius Apuleius (125-170 CE), in his classical work, *The Golden Ass*, observed someone dressed as Anubis, portrayed as a dog, and another person dressed as a divine cow, which was probably Hathor, in a colorful Isis parade (Apuleius 556-57).

Devotees in these parades frequently stopped at

altars along the roads with their sumptuous and magnificent displays, thus making quite an impression on common Romans (Cumont 97). Lucius Apuleius provided at length a vivid description of a supernatural vision of Isis and the actual spectacular Isis parade witnessed by Lucius, the lead character in the novel, *The Golden Ass* (Apuleius 543-67). The parade was called the Ploiaphesia or the Navigium Isis, a springtime blessing of ships that celebrated the beginning of the navigation of ships after the dangerous winter storms were over. It was supposed to call upon Isis to defend the ships from the caprices of Neptune, god of the sea. (This festive parade, along with other European parades, would evolve eventually into our Mardi Gras festival parades, which we gaily celebrate here in New Orleans.) The parade would feature: 1) masked persons, 2) women in the purest white gowns, 3) stolistes waving the garments of the goddess Isis, 4) dadophori with torches, 5) hymnodes, singers with flutes and brass, silver, and gold instruments, playing constantly,

6) the initiates into the cult of Isis, 7) priests with shaven heads, linen robes, who carried images of animal-faced gods and strange symbols, such as the urn covered with hieroglyphs and the image of a coiled snake containing Nile water, and 8) most importantly, an image of the goddess Isis. During the parade flower petals would be strewn about and participants would wear elaborate regalia, sparkling headdresses, grotesque costumes of hunters, gladiators, magistrates, philosophers, fishermen, bird-catchers, and others, while some would even cross dress. Animals such as tame bears, apes, and asses, would be dressed to appear like nobility. There were gleaming lights and shimmering mirrors to add more sparkle to the night-time spectacle (Cumont 97; Thury and Devinney 461-63; Alvar 40). The average Roman would have been familiar with the theriomorphic imagery, even for the gods to which Paul alludes, and Paul’s Roman audience would immediately have thought of them when he alludes to animals in his initial statements. Romans were “fascinated by the languishing songs and intoxicating melodies” sung by the singers and overall by the “pomp of their festivities and the magnificence of their processions” (Cumont 29).

I must ask myself what would Paul’s Roman audience have heard in their imagination as this letter was read publicly to them. As Romans, the animal references would have made them think

of the Isis cult, and the following language by Paul would continue to be connected to the Isis cult in their minds as they associated it with the Isis priestesses and priests. I will not ask what did Paul think of homosexuality; I will ask what did his audience hear when he wrote what he did, and they would have thought of the Isis cult. Furthermore, I am sure that Paul intended for them to think of the Isis cult.

Bible commentators generally pay little attention to Paul's references to animals. Bernadette Brooten noted that Paul's allusions most likely were inspired by the Egyptian deities. She also drew the parallel with Wis 15:18–19 and the Jewish philosopher Judaeus Philo (On the Decalogue 76–80), authors who condemned the use of animals as the images for God (Brooten 231-32). Brooten, however, did not conclude that Paul may have been describing, in particular, the Isis cult in Rome. Both Philo and the author of Wisdom of Solomon lived in Egypt and so were quite familiar with theriomorphic images. The text in Wis 15:18 says that the foolish “worship even the most hated animals, which are worse than all others.” Paul might have shared the invective of Wisdom of Solomon and Philo on this matter, for he was apparently familiar at least with the former work, as commentators have noted in the past. The classical scholar, R. E. Witt is one of the few who maintains that Paul alludes to Egyptian animal gods in Rom 1:23, and, in particular, Paul had in mind Anubis the Jackal god, Thoth the Ibis god, Bast the cat god, Edja the cobra god, and Sobek the crocodile god (Witt 255).

In the Isis cult, male priests had to abstain from sexual activity during ceremonies and festivals, and there were virgin priestesses who did not marry. Lucius Apuleius in his ancient literary work implied that the male priests permanently practiced chastity, and the character Lucius said that priesthood was too great a burden to bear, so he could not become an Isis priest after his dramatic conversion (Apuleius 570-71). Perpetual sexual abstinence by men would not have been viewed favorably in the moral climate of Rome where so much emphasis was placed upon the family. Paul's reference to men who give up their sexuality might describe sexually abstinent priests (who then presumably could love only each other, according to the popular gossip of Romans), and the snide comment about the women loving each other might be a reference to the priestesses, who were supposed to be virgin.

Notice, however, that Paul does not say that the women directly loved other women; we assume that. What he says is that women gave up natural love for unnatural love, which could mean unusual sexual behavior with men or some other form of sexual behavior that does not procreate. We do not know for sure what he means. Some critical scholars have made a good argument that Paul is condemning non-coital heterosexual activity by these women (Miller 1995: 1-11; Debel 39-64). David Murphy, in particular, documents a number of ancient authors who refer to sex that is contrary to nature or “unnatural sex” as male-female sexual activity that could include oral or anal sex, as well as other non-productive forms of sexual behavior. Thus, to assume that “unnatural sex” refers only to lesbianism, as many readers of our text have done, is very incorrect (Murphy 221-20). Paul sees their activity as “unnatural sex,” which usually means wasted sperm in the most general sense. Hence, if sperm is assumed, then a man must be involved with the women in the reference in Romans 1:26b (Townesley 2011: 711-12).

Paul may be condemning sexual activity between the priestesses and the male priests that might have involved use of an artificial phallus by the female on the male, for that is what Clement of Alexandria seems to be condemning around 200 CE when he speaks of these cults (Townesley 2011: 725-26). The earliest church father to assume that Rom 1:26 describes lesbian activity is John Chrysostom in 400 CE (Townesley 2011: 710-11).

Women priests often had sex with the castrated galli priests in the cult of Attis and Cybele, and this may have involved oral sex or artificial devices also (Townesley 2011: 725-26).

Significantly, lesbian women are mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, presumably because female same-sex did not offend. It did not involve penetration, it did not humiliate a man, either a slave, prisoner of war, or a youth, and it did not ultimately affect procreation. Thus, it did not affect male pride. Why does Paul even mention it here? Why does he mention it before male homoerotic behavior? I believe he is thinking of mystery cult priestesses, and in particular, the priestesses of Isis, who were very visible in Rome during their Isis celebrations. A critique of the Isis cult would begin with them. The fact that Paul mentions women before men is important, I believe, because his invective is directed primarily against the Isis cult. Some

scholars might counter my argument by pointing out that traditional Roman piety particularly despised female homoeroticism and Paul may be speaking to female homosexuality in general (Jewett 231-32). But this traditional Roman attitude might have further encouraged Paul to imply that Isis priestesses were engaging in behavior that offended traditional Roman piety.

How familiar would Paul have been with the Isis cult? Classical scholars point out that the Isis cult was a major presence in Paul's home and in many of the cities he visited on his missionary travels. The Isis cult had several shrines in Tarsus, and in the greater province of Cilicia, where Tarsus is located, Isis was known by her longer name, Isis Myrionymus. In Ephesus, where Paul stayed for a length of time, Isis and Artemis were equated (Witt 256-66; cf. Turcan 75-129). The male companion of Isis was Serapis (the Greek version of Osiris' name), and he had shrines in Iconium, Amphipolis, and Apollonia, places where Paul stayed or passed through. In Corinth, an important city for Paul, Isis had two temples and Serapis had one (Witt 260). Paul was familiar with the Isis cult and his allusion to "sounding brass" or "tinkling cymbal" in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13:1) might be a reference to the two instruments used in Isis worship and parades (Witt 266).

Paul may have been antagonized by the Isis cult for numerous reasons. As a monotheist he was particularly offended by Isis, for she "was the lover of the Nile menagerie" of gods (Witt 268). The unbridled sexuality of the Isis cult, or at least as it was popularly perceived, offended Paul. Perhaps what offended him the most was the similarity between the beliefs of the Isis cult and Christianity. Both religions spoke of a god, Osiris or Serapis and Jesus, who died and was yet alive, and devotees would experience immortality with Osiris or Jesus beyond the grave. Both Isis and Jesus offered forgiveness of sin. Both Isis and Jesus were said to have deep compassionate love. In both religions the initiation was a water baptism. Both Christ and Isis created a radical egalitarianism of all believers. Isis healed the blind, as did Jesus. Dreams and visions were popular modes of revelation in both religions (Witt 85-86, 257-58, 268). This "copycat" imagery in the Isis cult would have angered Paul greatly, though he would never have mentioned it directly, lest he give any credit to the Isis cult. Ultimately, when Christianity conquered the Roman Empire, imagery associated with Isis was stolen and

attributed to Mary, including the title, "Queen of Heaven," and the artistic portrayal of mother and child (Isis and Horus, Mary and Jesus) in artwork and statuary.

Romans, in general, did not like the cult of Isis. Its ethics often encouraged greater sexual freedom among devotees, even though abstinence for priests during festivals was advocated, and this sexual license offended many Romans. It was said that young men went to Isis temples to have sexual adventures (Cumont 91). Both Caesars Augustus and Tiberius expelled the Egyptian gods from Rome on the charge of immorality and opposition to the social order because the new religion stressed the inner spiritual life over public interests (Cumont 39). Under Caesar Tiberius (15-37 CE), in particular, the Isis priests in Rome were arrested and crucified, the temple of Isis was dismantled, and followers were expelled from the city in 19 CE (Angus 38; Danker 3:95). The story is told that a noble lady was seduced by a man who lusted after her, so he disguised himself like the jackal god, Anubis, and convinced her to have sex with him, since he was a god. (How dumb was she?) This scandal brought the harsh response of Tiberius (Witt 138). Already in the early years of its presence in Rome, the Roman senate ordered Serapis (the Greek version of Osiris) and Isis shrines destroyed in 59, 58, 53, and 48 BCE due to corrupting influences engendered by the religion, loose morality, and the emotional piety connected to the cult. Caligula (37-41 CE) gave the Isis movement a protected status, however, and the movement began to rebound in the next generation thereafter. Caligula established the Navigium Isis, the flamboyant procession, and he even participated in the parade dressed in female garb (Cumont 81). That would have been the time when Paul went to Rome. Roman women, in particular, were attracted to the emotional aspects of the Isis cult, and to an equal degree, the Cybele cult as well (Cumont 44).

Paul's letter was written at a time when the Isis cult was growing in popularity despite the hostility of many Romans. Thus, if Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, a group of folk he had not yet visited, it would have been most wise for him to condemn something as a form of immoral behavior that he knew most Romans did not like. That would be wise rhetoric on his part. Furthermore, Paul himself probably despised the Isis cult for its similarity to Christianity. Thus, I believe that Paul is not

condemning homosexuality in general, he is condemning the Isis cult. I know that I cannot convince everyone with this argument, but I offer it as a thought provoking suggestion.

Other scholars suggest that Paul may be loosely condemning a wide range of goddess cults of the ancient Mediterranean world, all of which had followers in Rome. Goddesses, such as Cybele from Asia Minor (with dramatically castrated priests who carried their testicles in their hands), Artemis of Greece, Diana from Ephesus, and Aphrodite (Greece)/Venus (Rome) had eunuch priests and virgin priestesses as votaries in their service. Romans, in general, were critical of these cults. Most average Romans especially despised the cult of Cybele because of the castrated priests (Townesley 2011: 715, 719). Paul would have encountered devotees of these cults throughout Greece and Rome.

The existence of such temple servants can be found in Sumerian texts from the third millennium BCE. These texts describe gala priests and assinu priests who engaged in anal sex with worshippers who came to the temples. The word assinu combines the Sumerian symbols for dog and woman, which probably gave rise to the slang in both Hebrew and Greek that called a male prostitute a “dog.” The assinu priest may have been castrated. The male prostitute might have assumed the posture of a dog in the sexual act, hence the insulting nickname in the ancient world and in the Bible. These priests were dedicated to the Sumerian goddess, Innana, and spoke of their anus being sacred to the goddess. Also, the Semitic goddess, Ishtar, had assinu priests dedicated to her, and they likewise engaged in anal sex (Townesley 2011: 719-20).

In Greece the priests were called galli priests, and, in particular, the cult of Cybele in Turkey had such priests. Lucius Apuleius refers to such eunuch priests and attributes homoerotic desires and behavior to them (Townesley 2011: 724-25). Apuleius makes fun of them by portraying them in one of his narratives as oversexed and desirous of sex with a young boy but disappointed when they discover that their “gift” for sex is a donkey (Townesley 2011: 387-89). Cybele was worshipped in Asia Minor as early as the seventh century BCE, in Greece by the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, and she came to Rome in 204 BCE to help the Romans defeat the Carthaginians and their general Hannibal in the Second Punic War. There it subsequently

became popular among a small group of devoted Romans, though most Romans despised the cult (Vermaseren 38-41; Turcan 28-65; Townesley 2011: 77-18). Cybele was assimilated to Atargatis, a mother goddess in Syria, who was virtually identical to Ishtar, so there is continuity in all these traditions with the various female deities (Nissinen 31-32).

The galli priests were known for their extreme behavior and extravagant personal appearance. On festival days they would parade in the streets of Rome with a yellow long garment, wearing chest ornaments, pendants, ear-rings, finger-rings, bleached long hair that was disheveled or dressed and waved like that of women. They would wear so much make-up that their faces appeared to be white-washed walls. They flagellated themselves until blood flowed, and the neophytes would use a sharp stone to castrate themselves, which Romans considered an incredible act of insanity (Cumont 56-67; Vermaseren 96-101). Self-castration would occur in a state of ecstasy, probably aided by the influence of drugs. (It would have to be!) These galli priests believed that their self-castration enabled them to become more like their gods, an idea that particularly would have horrified Paul. His references to men giving up desire for women might be a loose reference to the self-castration practiced in some cults like that of Attis and Cybele, where the self-castration occurred during moments of ecstasy and the priests then carried their recently severed testicles around in their hands as a demonstration of piety, and sometimes threw them into homes. In Rome the galli priests would dance in the street to tambourines and flutes, cut themselves, and tell peoples’ fortunes (Vermaseren 96-97; Townesley 2011: 721-22). Thus, they were extremely visible and Paul would have been aware of their behavior.

Since Attis and Cybele devotees were found in Galatia, Paul might readily recall this folk from his mission work there. In Gal 5:12 he desired that his opponents from Jerusalem would “castrate” themselves,” and this might have been a sarcastic allusion to the Attis priests which the Galatian audience would have appreciated. Paul would have encountered the Cybele priests in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. Perhaps Paul is throwing in a loose allusion to Attis priests in a free wheeling condemnation of the Isis cult in Romans 1, or perhaps Isis priests at times were castrated. Would this be why Lucius in the Golden Ass chose not to become an Isis priest, even though he did not mention it?

Perhaps Paul alludes to self-castration when he says they "received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Rom 1:27). Most commentators usually suggest that this simply refers to anal and penile damage that results from homosexual behavior (Loader 20; Townsley 2011: 53). I doubt that Paul would refer to that phenomenon, I suspect more likely that he alludes to the more well-known activity of self-castration that occurred in several of these cults. I believe that is what Paul's Roman audience would have assumed.

The cultic activity connected to Isis devotion, as well as other goddesses, proliferated in the Mediterranean world between the fourth century BCE and the third century CE. Thus, Paul's diatribe in Rom 1:18–32 may be about such idolatrous religions in general, and verses 26–27 attack the sex practices connected to worship. What Paul would find offensive about this cultic behavior, besides the obvious worship of other gods, is that the sexual behavior did not bring about procreation, and that is what makes it "unnatural."

Paul has a broad definition for "unnatural," for in Rom 4:18 he speaks of how God grafts the wild olive branch onto the domestic grape vine and that is described by him as "unnatural." So his use of the word is not exclusively in sexual categories (McNeill 53). However, conservative commentators have analyzed in great detail how Paul uses the concept of "unnatural" and observed that he very often uses it for serious moral offenses, including sexual activity (Wold 177-86; De Young 142-64). They then assume that homosexuality is being described by Paul. However, Paul certainly would have viewed the activity of the Isis devotees in general to be most "unnatural," so his reference might not be exclusively to homosexual behavior. It could include some bizarre female sexual activity. Jeramy Townsley also believes that Paul is condemning the sexual actions of the mystery religions in general with this concept, not any form of sexual orientation, for in that age people did not think in terms of sexual orientation such as heterosexual or homosexual, they thought in terms of actions (Townsley 2011: 707-28). Paul would have seen the activities in so many of these mystery cults as "unnatural." It has also been observed that Paul may have been guilty of a category mistake; he may have confused "unnatural" with what were really merely the "customs" of his age (Phipps 128-31). Ultimately, I believe too much energy is spent on trying to understand what Paul meant by

"unnatural" in regard to the modern homosexuality debate, because the more important question is what is he actually describing in Romans 1. If he is speaking of cultic sexuality, then it is irrelevant for the modern debate concerning the sinfulness of homosexual behavior. This is especially true if the allusion to the women is actually referring to "unnatural" heterosexual activity.

Robert Gagnon's comprehensive evaluation of this text demands a short response. He believes that Paul is speaking generally of all same sex activity. One of his arguments suggests that in Romans 1 Paul subtly alludes to Gen 1:27, where heterosexual marriage is instituted. When Paul speaks of birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles in Rom 1:23, the two Greek words that he uses for "birds" and reptiles" are the same words that the Greek Septuagint uses in Gen 1:26. The words that he uses for "females" and "males" are the same words in the Greek translation of Gen 1:27 (Gagnon 290-91; Loader 27), which is a foundational text for marriage and heterosexual union. Gagnon believes that by alluding to Genesis 1 and its clear description of the heterosexual relationship between the man and the woman, Paul thereby condemns any homoerotic behavior. In response, I would note that to say Paul was inspired by Genesis 1 is a good observation. I believe that Paul might have drawn upon the animal language of Genesis 1 for two of the words in his invective against the Isis cult. I would respond to Gagnon that all three words used by Paul, "birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles," more directly correspond to animals revered as theriomorphic images of the Egyptian gods in the Isis cult, especially Horus and Hathor. The words for "male" and "female" used by Paul would be normal words used to describe people. That the language in Romans 1 is similar to Genesis 1 I do not doubt, but I believe the real correspondence is between this language and the cult of Isis in Rome.

Gagnon mounts a convincing argument that Jews in Paul's day would have condemned all forms of homosexuality, especially demonstrated in the very extensive writings of Philo and Josephus, and Gagnon firmly believes that Paul shared those convictions. Martti Nissinen also observes the same values in the writings of Philo, Josephus and other Jewish authors in this era (Nissinen 89-102). As Gagnon reads Romans 1, he extrapolates Paul's condemnation of the particular activity described in this text to conclude that Paul used this language to condemn all same-sex activities

(Gagnon 159-83, 229-303; Smith 223-56). But that does not prove that Romans 1 in talking about same sex behavior is general. Even if Gagnon is correct in understanding that Paul would condemn all homosexual behavior, as stated earlier, we theologize off of the biblical texts, not the reconstructed intellectual and religious values of that culture or an individual biblical author. Sometimes such scholarly speculation is helpful on particular issues, and it can inspire preachers in their sermonizing, but we cannot routinely theologize for significant church positions using our scholarly conclusions about the probable beliefs of biblical authors which are not written down in the biblical text. We theologize off of the text, and we determine what the text says. It is bad interpretative technique to say that since Paul probably disliked same sex behavior, he must be describing all same sex behavior in Romans 1. We must read the text on its own to see what it is saying.

I creatively suggest what the thinking of biblical authors might have been in my biblical commentaries and writings frequently, but I would not wish for my views to be enshrined as official theology for any denomination. They are scholarly opinions, and scholarly opinions change over the years. Would we theologize off of the general understandings of biblical authors about slavery, women, and war, or would we rather use what those authors directly said in the biblical about those issues? Often the biblical texts lead us to look beyond the mere cultural assumptions of the age in which they were articulated. Would we ask Paul or extrapolate from his culturally conditioned beliefs what he felt about using medicine, flying in airplanes, or how the universe was constructed? More relevant, would we ask Paul his opinion about having sex with our wives in their non-fertile period? As a good Jew he would condemn it. But many Christians do that as a form of birth control. I mention that last example because conservative critics often say that we can bracket Paul's scientific views as part of the learning of that age, but matters of sexuality have eternal value and should not be dismissed as culturally conditioned. But in reality, we do believe differently from the biblical authors on certain moral and sexual issues because of the great cultural chasm between us and their age. The church and individual denominations should craft official theology off of the biblical texts, not our scholarly reconstructions of their thought. Of course, for many Christians,

theology is also crafted off of natural knowledge, the reigning philosophical paradigm of our modern age, human existential need, and inner spiritual insight. All the more should such theologians be cautious about making biblical texts say more than they actually do.

Finally, there are other ways of interpreting these passages in Romans 1. There are scholars who suggest that Paul is describing homosexual behavior outside of the cult. Some suggest that he is describing the sexual activities of the rich and powerful Romans of that age who engaged in degenerate sexual activity and forced slaves to do their sexual bidding. Thus, what is being described is the sexual abuse of slaves and young children, and that abuse of people is what makes it so evil. Idolatry permits that kind of immoral behavior. Many of the Christians in Paul's Roman audience were probably male slaves forced into submissive sex by their masters to demonstrate the superior status the master held. They would resonate strongly with Paul's angry language (Furnish 52-83; Scroggs 115-18; Hultgren 315-25; Jewett 238-40). Some believe that Paul's audience would have immediately thought of pederasty when they heard these lines, because that was so common and so abusive (Miller 1997; 861-66). It has also been suggested that Paul is describing homosexual behavior in this passage as an example of Gentile "uncleanness" but not necessarily sin; it is an impurity resulting from idol worship (Countryman 104-23; Kalin 423-32). (I find that argument not too convincing.) It has been hypothesized that Paul condemns not so much homosexual behavior as the unbridled lust that occurs in such contexts (Frederickson 177-222). Perhaps, Paul simply modeled his discourse after the popular understanding of the Sodom story in his age in order to talk about Gentile sin in general (Esler 4-16). (I find that argument rather odd, since he still is speaking of something that he finds offensive.) Many ideas have been suggested in regard to these passages.

The conservative who sees verses 26-27 as a condemnation of homosexual behavior sometimes will maintain that Paul is really pointing out two different forms of immoral behavior, idolatry and homosexuality in this chapter. I, however, point adamantly to the expression, "for this reason" in verse 26, which connects the idolatry and the sexuality by implying that the idolatry led to the sexual behavior. We must think in terms of the idolatry that Paul may be describing and connect it to the sexual activity he criticizes. Too often folks who

quote this passage simply speak of idolatry in general and move quickly to the sexual characterizations as a separate issue for Paul.

We need to pay attention to the theriomorphic imagery connected to the worship of other gods. If Paul is making a significant statement with his references to animals, then the Isis cult comes immediately to mind. Furthermore, Paul is correct in making the connection between the animal image idolatry and the sexual activity. The Isis religion with its theriomorphic imagery, as well as the other goddess religions, indeed did mandate that sometimes male priests had to be castrated and the priestesses had to be perpetually virgin. That Paul was referring to either the Isis religion or one of the other goddess cults is borne out by the testimony of the third-century CE church father Hippolytus, who links the references in Rom 1:26–27 with castrated priests in these other religions, which he still observed in his own age (Townesley 2011: 723). My thesis is not unique; Hippolytus beat me to it eighteen centuries ago. Hippolytus (Refutation of all Heresies, Book V, chap II) characterized the beliefs of a group of people known as the Naassenes, who combined Christianity with ideas from the cult of Attis and Cybele.

According to Hippolytus, the Naassenes quoted Romans 1 to affirm their belief that the castrated Attis passes over into a new world where he becomes a “new creature, a new man,” a hermaphrodite by virtue of his self-castration. Hippolytus believed that Paul’s statements actually rejected their beliefs in particular, even though the Naassenes quoted the passage to support their views (Roberts and Donaldson 49; Townesley 2013: 58-59). Origen quotes this passage in conjunction with his criticism of vestal virgins and castrated galli priests (Townesley 2013: 67-68). Chrysostom likewise alluded to this passage in a homily when referring to galli priests in his own age (Townesley 2013: 59-62). Jeramy Townesley seeks to document how church fathers up until the fourth century CE used this text primarily to condemn priestesses in service of pagan goddesses, castrated male priests, and the custom of self castration among Christian men (Townesley 2013: 56-70).

In this passage in Romans 1 I believe that Paul’s description of idolatry is very closely connected to the sexual practices he condemns. He is condemning the Isis cult and perhaps related mystery religions, not general homosexuality.

In conclusion, I believe that there is no passage in the biblical text that truly condemns a loving relationship between two adult, free people, who truly love each other. This, of course, does not settle the debate, for there still remain the views found in the history of the Christian tradition, the official pronouncements of church bodies, and the scientific discussion of gender identity. I cannot discuss those issues. But I would maintain that the biblical texts should not be called forth in the condemnation of gay and lesbian people in our society today.

There are those voices today, especially among my college students and among intelligentsia in general, who declare that the Bible is an oppressive book because it supported slavery, and it still suppresses women and condemns gays. I say that this is not true whenever I have the opportunity; I try to teach the students otherwise. That is one of the reasons for writing this article. Maybe I am defending the Bible against its critics as much as I am defending the rights of gay and lesbian individuals.

REFERENCE

- [1] Alvar, Jamie. 2020. “Isis: Egypt’s Enduring Mother Goddess.” *National Geographic History* 6, 1 (2020): 28-43.
- [2] Angus, S. 1928. *The Mystery-Religions and Christianity*. London, Eng.: John Murray.
- [3] Apuleius, Lucius 1965 (original edition 1915). *The Golden Ass: Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*. Translated by W. Adlington. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- [4] “Apuleius, Lucius” Brooten, Bernadette. 1996. *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- [5] Countryman, William. 1988. *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.
- [6] Cumont, Franz. 1956 (original edition 1911). *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*. New York, NY: Dover.
- [7] Danker, Frederick. 2006-2009. “Isis,” In *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., edited by Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, 3:95-96. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- [8] De Young, James. 2000. *Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.
- [9] Debel, Hans. 2009-2010. “An Admonition on Sexual Affairs: A Reconsideration of Rom 1:26–27.” *Louvain Studies* 34: 39–64.

Romans 1:26-27 condemns the Cult of Isis, not Homosexuality

- [9] Esler, Philip. 2004. "The Sodom Tradition in Romans 1:18–32." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34: 4–16.
- [10] Frederickson, David. 2000. "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros." In *Homosexuality, Science and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, edited by David Balch, 177–222. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press.
- [11] Furnish, Victor Paul 1979. *The Moral Teaching of Paul*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- [12] Hultgren, Arland. 1994. "Being Faithful to the Scriptures: Romans 1:26–27 as a Case in Point." *Word and World* 14: 315–25.
- [13] Jewett, Robert. 2000. "The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans 1:24–27." In *Homosexuality, Science and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, edited by David Balch, 233–41. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press.
- [14] Kalin, Everett. 2003. "Roman 1:26–27 and Homosexuality." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 30: 423–32.
- [15] Loader, William 2010. *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- [16] McNeill, John. 1988. *The Church and the Homosexual*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- [17] Miller, J. E. 1995. "The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?" *Novum Testamentum* 37: 1–11.
- [18] 1997. "Pederasty and Romans 1:27: A Response to Mark Smith." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65: 861–66.
- [19] Murphy, David. 2019. "More Evidence Pertaining to 'Their Females' in Romans 1:26," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138 (2019): 221–40.
- [20] Nissinen, Martti. 1998. *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*. Translated by Kirsi Stjerna. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- [21] Phipps, W. E. 2002. "Paul on 'Unnatural' Sex." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29:128–31.
- [22] Roberts, Alexander; and James Donaldson, eds. 1978. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press.
- [23] Scroggs, Robin. 1983. *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.
- [24] Smith, M. D. 1996. "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26–27." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64: 223–56.
- [25] Solomon, Friedrich. 1979. *Isis among the Greeks and Romans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- [26] Thury, Eva; and Margaret Devinney. 2013. *Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths*. Third edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- [27] Townsley, Jeremy. 2011. "Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23–28." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130: 707–28.
- [28] "Queer Sects in Patristic Commentaries on Romans 1:26–17: Goddess Cults, Free Will, and "Sex Contrary to Nature"?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (2013): 56–79.
- [29] Turcan, Robert. 1996. *The Cults of the Roman Empire*. Translated by Antonia Nevill. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [30] Vermaseren, Maarten. 1977. *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult*. London, Eng.: Thames and Hudson.
- [31] Witt, R. E. 1971. *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World. Aspects of Greek and Roman Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- [32] Wold, Donald 1998. *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Citation: Robert Gnuse, "Romans 1:26-27 condemns the Cult of Isis, not Homosexuality", *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 8(3), 2021, pp. 33-41.

Copyright: © 2021 Robert Gnuse. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.