

The Bible and Love Between Women

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The voices of any early Christian women who may have romantically loved other women have not come down to us. Instead, we have the early Christian voices who treated such love with contempt. The apostle Paul declared that same-sex unions shared between women disturbed the natural order (Romans 1:26-27). Paul's understanding of sexual love between women overlaps closely with the general conceptions of sexual relations found throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. Greek and Latin writers in his culture agreed with Paul that a woman was to be "under a man" (Romans 7:2, where the Greek word for "married" is literally "under a man"), thereby the passive object of sexual activity, and not a sexual subject who actively pursues her desires with other women. Paul's teaching on this subject proved foundational for the condemnation of same-sex sexual expression by later Christian writers who argued variously that it was unnatural, impure, dishonorable, shameful, sinful, and rendered the participants deserving of punishment in hell. Further, Paul's negative portrayal of female homoeroticism not only influenced the early church fathers' treatment of the issue, but has also remained influential into our own century.

In what follows, I am focusing on erotic relations between women, but I want to note that Mary Rose D'Angelo has applied Adrienne Rich's concept of a "lesbian continuum" to early Christianity to denote bonding between female partners, regardless of erotic involvement (e.g., Romans 16:12; Philippians 4:11). Early Christianity did provide both women and men with opportunities for close bonding with members of their own sex.

The Jewish Bible explicitly prohibited sexual relations between males

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(Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), but not between females. Some have argued that Ruth had a lesbian relationship with her mother-in-law, Naomi (see e.g., Ruth 1:14, "Ruth clung to her [i.e., Naomi]"), but this is speculation, and ultimately, Ruth married a man, Boaz (Ruth 4:13).

Within the New Testament, the gospels do not present Jesus as addressing the question of same-sex sexual expression, but the apostle Paul does condemn relations between both females and males. In his Letter to the Romans, chapter 1, Paul states that idol worshipers could have known God through observing God's created works. He argues that God punished idol worshipers by giving "them up to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves" (Romans 1:24), and that "God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another" (Romans 1:26-27). Such persons "deserve to die" (Romans 1:32).

Some scholars have argued that Romans 1:26 refers to intercourse between a woman and an animal (prohibited in Leviticus 18:23; 20:16), to intercourse during a woman's menstrual period (prohibited in Leviticus 18:19), or to anal intercourse between a woman and

a man (not prohibited in the Jewish Bible and allowed by the majority of ancient Jewish rabbis). Romans 1:27, however, introduces sexual relations between males with the term "in the same way," thereby specifying that the females' unnatural intercourse was of the same type as that of the males. Further, other ancient sources also depicted sexual relations between women as unnatural (Plato [5th-4th C. BCE], Seneca the Elder [1st C. BCE-1st C. CE], Martial [1st C. CE-2d C. CE], Ovid [1st C. BCE-1st C. CE], Ptolemy [2d C. CE], Artemidoros [2d C. CE], probably Dorotheos of Sidon [1st C. CE]).

Paul's Sexual Attitudes Culturally Determined

We can best understand Paul's response to sexual relations between women in the context of the culture of the Roman Empire and its assumptions about proper sexual relations. While Roman-period non-Christian writers disagree on whether to condone sexual relations between males, nearly all of these writers condemn sexual relations between women. Against the background of the common cultural assumption that sexual relations should naturally occur between two unequal parties (e.g., a man and his wife, a male slave owner and his male or female slave, a man and his mistress, a man and a prostitute), such writers as Seneca the Elder, Mar-

tial, Soranos (1st-2d C. CE), and Lucian (2d C. CE) depicted women who had sexual relations with other women as having become like men. They applied the term *tribades* (cf. the later term "tribadism") to such women and represented them as trying to transcend the passive, subordinate role accorded to them by nature and attempting to take on a dominating, penetrating role. Ancient medical writers went as far as to prescribe a selective clitoridectomy, apparently for women whose clitorises were ostensibly capable of penetration (Soranos, as excerpted in Caelius Aurelianus [5th C. CE], Mustio [perhaps 5th or 6th C. CE], and Paulus of Aegina [7th C. CE]). Paul's condemnation fits in well with the greater awareness of sexual love between women documented in the Roman world.

Paul's earliest readers, the early church fathers, read Paul as a man of his time; they saw him as condemning homoeroticism for the same reasons that others of their culture did. Paul used the terms "impurity," "to degrade," "to exchange," "natural," and "unnatural" in the ways that others in the ancient world employed these terms. In ancient Mediterranean culture generally, "impurity" meant a blurring of boundaries, in this case, of the boundaries between femaleness and maleness. Just as, according to the Book of Leviticus, impure animals were those that did not conform to delineated categories, the people about whom Paul was speaking were not maintaining the clear gender polarity and complementarity necessary for a specific social order. Thus, taking seriously Paul's description of homoeroticism as "impurity" helps us to see it as a societal, rather than a private concern.

The term Paul uses for "degrade" can also be rendered "dishonor." Paul's use of this term demonstrates his conviction that the treatment of female and male bodies should differ, especially with respect to honor. Men were accorded honor because their sex occupied a superior and dominant station that afforded them that right. Paul asks in his First Letter to the Corinthians 11:14, "Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him?" This required gender

differentiation in hair length points to bodily appearance as a primary basis for distinguishing between women and men. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul asserts that the man is head of woman. According to 1 Corinthians 11:7, short hair and the lack of a veil signify the male body, as God's image and glory; the opposite conditions, long hair and veil, apply to the female body, marking the woman's subordinate status as the glory of man. In this hierarchical framework, a non-compliant woman brings shame upon her husband. Against the background of the gendered cultures of the Roman world, Paul's earliest readers saw him as condemning men who had relinquished the honor due to the male sex and had become effeminate and women who did not conform to Paul's model of the man as head of woman.

Paul used the word "exchanged" to indicate that people knew the natural sexual order of the universe and left it behind. Some scholars contend that Paul was referring to heterosexual persons committing homosexual acts, rather than to lesbian and gay persons (e.g., Boswell) or that he did not have a concept of sexual orientation at all (e.g., Goss). While ancient constructions of the erotic differed from our own, both ancient astrological and medical texts attest to the concept of life-long erotic orientations, caused, e.g., by the constellation under which one was born, by the male and female seed not mingling well at conception, or by inheritance. Thus, Paul could well have been familiar with the concept of erotic orientation, without accepting that as a valid reason for homoerotic expression. Similarly, astrologers saw female homoerotic orientation as astrally determined, but nevertheless "unnatural" (e.g., Ptolemy).

"When in Rome..."

If we read Romans 1:26-27 against the backdrop of a broad range of ancient sources, "natural" intercourse means penetration of a subordinate person by a dominant one. Other Pauline texts further demonstrate that Paul shared common cultural assumptions of the Roman world, for example: Romans 7:2, in which Paul speaks of a married woman as "under a man," and 1 Corin-

thians 11:2-3, in which Paul calls man "head of woman." The shapers of Graeco-Roman culture saw any type of vaginal intercourse, whether consensual or coerced, as natural (including, e.g., between a man and his slave). Thus the "natural intercourse" that the females of Romans 1:26 gave up include such forms of vaginal intercourse as marital relations, adultery, rape, incest, prostitution, and sexual relations between an adult male and a minor girl.

These understandings of "natural intercourse" derive from ancient understandings of nature generally. Two principal ways of conceptualizing nature were available to Paul: (1) nature as the order of creation, which would refer to the naturalness of marriage between women and men, based on Genesis 2, according to which God created woman from man (see Paul's use of Genesis 2 in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16); or (2) the ancient concept that women have a different nature from men. Either concept entails a gender hierarchy. According to either concept, sexual relations between women are "unnatural," because a sexual encounter necessarily includes an active and a passive partner, and women cannot naturally assume the active role, thus rendering natural sexual relations between women impossible.

Like Paul, the early Christian writers of the second through the fifth centuries that have been passed down to us vigorously condemn sexual relations between women. Thus, Christian apocalyptic visions of hell echo Paul's teaching that these women "deserve to die" (Romans 1:32). These visions include images of homoerotic women suffering torture in hell for their sin: being forced to cast themselves off a cliff (*Apocalypse of Peter* [2d C.]), burning in hell (*Acts of Thomas* [3d C.]), and running in a river of fire (*Apocalypse of Paul* [3d C.]). Tertullian of Carthage (2d-3d C.) derides homoerotic women as outsiders to polite society, associating them with prostitutes, and states that one would not want even to take a sip from such a woman's cup (*On the Pallium; On the Resurrection of the Flesh*). John Chrysostom (4th-5th C.) argues that female homoeroticism is "far more disgraceful" than male homoeroticism, "since they ought

to feel more shame than men." Chrysostom, arguing that women have a different nature from men and that by nature woman was commanded to be man's helper, sees homoeroticism as overturning the social order, which is protected by nature: "nature knows her own boundaries." Chrysostom attacks homoeroticism with such invectives as: "whatever transgression you speak of, you will name none equal to this lawlessness"; "there is nothing more irrational and grievous than this outrage"; and "how many hells will suffice for such people?" (*Homilies on Romans*).

Marriage Between Women

In spite of tremendous opposition by Christians and others, sources demonstrate that women in this period engaged in what they saw as woman-woman marriage. Clement of Alexandria (2d-3d C.) responds to women who had long-term relationships with other women that they defined as marriage (*Instructor*). (Ptolemy, Lucian, the rabbinical commentary known as the *Sifra* [before ca. 220 CE], Hephastion of Thebes [4th-5th C. CE], and possibly Iamblichos [2d C. CE] also refer to woman-woman marriage. Further, in a papyrus letter from Egypt [probably 3d C. CE], a mother refers to her daughter's wife [Papyrus Oxyrhynchos 4340].) Clement argues that such marriages were unnatural because they defied God, who created woman from man in order for her to receive men's seed and to help him; that they prevented the male seed from finding a proper field; that the uteri of the two women were calling out to be filled with the male seed; that humans should not imitate such lascivious animals as the hare; and that Paul called female homoeroticism unnatural in Romans 1:26-27.

Hippolytos of Rome (2d-3d C.) reports on a group of Gnostic Christians called the Naassenes (defined by Hippolytos as heretical), who rejected "natural intercourse" between women and men on the belief that androgyny characterized the world above. We do



not know whether they promoted same-sex love, but they did interpret Paul in Romans 1:20-27 as speaking about an "unspeakable mystery of blessed pleasure" (*The Refutation of All Heresies*).

Ironically, even though early Christians generally opposed homoeroticism, they themselves created homosocial environments in which it could occur, a fact that did not escape Christian monastic leaders. Egyptian monk Shenute of Atripe (4th-5th C.) explicitly warns nuns against same-sex sexual contact (*On the Monastic Life*) and describes the beating of two nuns as punishment for having had such contact (*Letters*). In a similar vein, Augustine of Hippo (4th-5th C.) instructs that nuns go out in groups of three (*Epistles*).

Are All Biblical Traditions Created Equal?

How can Christians of today respond to this early Christian tradition of condemning sexual love between women? While some Christians might want to downplay it or to see it as just a reflection of ancient culture, I suggest that this horrific vilification of such women requires careful theological reflection. Do we want to perpetuate all biblical traditions that have persisted through the centuries? Do we agree with Paul that such love is unnatural, with the *Acts of Thomas* that such women should burn in hell, or with John Chrysostom that women ought to feel more shame than men? These are Christian traditions, but are they traditions of which we can be proud? Christian citizens have a special responsibility to rethink Christian teachings that have historically led to physical torture and even death. For example, an American colonial statute in New Haven placed sexual love between women under the death penalty, explicitly quoting Romans 1:26 as support (*New Haven's Settling in New England: And Some Lawes for Government*). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons can greatly contribute to a moral reform of Christianity by soberly facing our past and creating theologies for the future. ▼

A version of this article will appear in the *Encyclopedia of Lesbianism*, Bonnie Zimmerman, editor (Garland Publishers).

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