

world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?" Paul says that in spite of God existing as Creator, the world has rejected Him, and specifically "did not honor Him as God or give [Him] thanks." While this can be taken in the direction of pagans refusing to give the One True God the worship and adoration He is appropriately due, Dunn takes this more in the direction of thanksgiving to God as a characteristic of daily life, concluding:

"Paul is obviously thinking more in terms of thanksgiving as characteristic of a whole life, as the appropriate response of one whose daily experience is shaped by the recognition that he stands in debt to God, that his very life and experience of living is a gift from God...In Paul's perspective this attitude of awe (the fear of the Lord) and thankful dependence is how knowledge of God should express itself. But human behavior is marked by an irrational disjunction between what man knows to be the true state of affairs and a life at odds with that knowledge. This failure to give God his due and to receive life as God's gift is Paul's way of expressing the primal sin of humankind."⁸⁶

1:22-23 The idolatry of the nations at large, resultant from them rejecting the Creator God, is pretty severe in Paul's view: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (NRSV). While any Jewish Believers in Rome should have been able to make various connections between how the Ancient Israelites would have encountered Ancient Egyptian idolatry in the manner of worshipping various animals or reptiles, or more contemporarily the Greeks and Romans worshipping various deities' statues in the form of people—how many realized that much of the language of vs. 22-23 was actually rooted in Ancient Israel's, *their own ancestors'*, past idolatry? One of the most horrendous scenes in the entire Bible was Ancient Israel's fashioning of the golden calf at the base of Mount Sinai (Exodus 32), a theme which hardly escapes anyone reading the remainder of the Tanach. For just as the pagans exchanged acknowledging the One True God for worthless idols, so has Israel too not been too innocent:

"[S]o that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. And *beware* not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, from Egypt, to be a people for His own possession, as today" (Deuteronomy 4:16-20).

"They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a molten image. Thus they exchanged their glory for the image of an ox that eats grass" (Psalm 106:19-20).

"But where are your gods which you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble; for *according to* the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah" (Jeremiah 2:28).

Paul's discussion about how his own Jewish contemporaries have not exactly been pristine in their obedience to God, is a theme which he will pick up in ch. 2. However, Paul, like any good Jewish teacher of his era would, goes after the problems of humanity in general *first*, seemingly using some stock language afforded to him. The logic is quite sound: humanity at large is fallen into the clutches of sin, *and* do not exclude the Jewish people from humanity.

⁸⁶ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:59.

Today as modern readers, especially those of us in the West, when we encounter Paul's view about idolatry—what do we think? We might think of v. 21 and some of the flaws of various atheists or agnostics, who just do not seem to “get” the Intelligent Design of God in Creation. But when it comes to thinking of people actually worshipping carved images of animals, reptiles, or other people—is not that just something of the distant past? Sure, Nineteenth Century missionaries to Africa or Asia encountered these things, but not enlightened Twenty-First Century people? Osborne's observations might help us to collect some of our thoughts:

“The major thrust, of course, is upon the worship of God alone, and the idol represents the tendency of sinful humanity to reject the heavenly reality and embrace only the earthly, that is, to exchange the eternal for the temporary. This was not just an ancient problem. In many parts of the world idolatry is just as predominant as it was in the Roman Empire. In the West, where there are few physical idols, another type of idolatry predominates (even more dangerous because it is not identified as such): the idolatry of self that is manifested in possessions, status in society, and sex.”⁸⁷

Even with many of us needing to recognize different forms of idolatry, such as the worship or veneration of self—in clear violation of the First Commandment (Exodus 20:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:6-7)—those of us who have been conditioned to a relatively Western view of image-worshipping idolatry, do need to be readjusted a little. Since the Second World War, we do live in a post-colonial and post-imperial world, where people in countries previously a part of the old British Empire or French Empire have migrated to Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Where I live in North Dallas (2014), the suburb of Richardson, a town originally founded in 1873—and which was originally settled by people from such Southern places as Kentucky and Tennessee—is now widely populated by immigrants from East Asia. Downtown Richardson has shops and restaurants with signs in Chinese, Arabic, Urdu, and other languages. There are some literal idols placed here and there which I drive past several times a week as I do errands. While the original Anglo and Scots-Irish settlers of this part of Texas may not have brought this, other people did. While Westerners have widely dismissed actual worship or veneration of images (Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10), Easterners still often fall into the same category as portrayed by Paul in Romans ch. 1.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

1:24-25 Having just asserted how the pagans have been foolish so as to reject the Creator God, and accept idolatry (vs. 19-23), Paul specifies some of the major consequences of this: “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts unto uncleanness, that their bodies should be dishonored among themselves” (v. 24, American Standard Version). Here, *akatharsia* (ἀκαθαρσία), often rendered as either “impurity” (NASU) or “sexual impurity” (NIV), is rightly considered to involve “**a state of moral corruption**” (BDAG),⁸⁸ where the God-intentioned usage of the human body finds itself misused in significant ways. No specific kind of sexual promiscuity is stated here, which means that all sexual perversion is rooted in a denial of God as Creator.⁸⁹ And, while the pagans are in view in v. 24, not unimportant to overlook is how the verb *paradidōmi* (παράδιδωμι), employed for “gave them over,” also

⁸⁷ Osborne, 50.

⁸⁸ BDAG, 34.

⁸⁹ Cf. Harrison, in *EXP*, 10:24 makes reference to temple/cultic prostitution (cf. Deuteronomy 23:17-18), as it is surely among the different factors involving the pagans being given over the base lusts.

appears in Acts 7:42 describing Ancient Israel's past idolatry: "But God turned away and delivered them up [*paradidōmi*] to serve the host of heaven."

Paul is not at all happy or elated about the condition of the pagans, who have been turned over to sin because of their rejection of God. He emotes, "they have exchanged the truth of God for an untruth, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed for ever: Amen" (v. 25, Moffat New Testament). Early on in his ministry, he could laud the Thessalonians, "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Here, however, all he can display is a repugnance for what has manifested by the pagans' behavior. Once again, we need to remember that Paul—even though as a servant of Israel's Messiah, wants to see all transformed by the dynamic power of the good news (v. 16)—does demonstrate some typical, First Century Jewish attitudes toward the nations at large. In the estimation of Dunn,

"For the typical Jew it was always an indication of the ludicrous folly of other religions that they preferred to worship the creature rather than the Creator, to worship indeed the creation of their own hands...The reply that the images were only representations of deity is already met by the emphasis on God's invisibility (v 20), glory, and incorruptibility (v 23). The idol is a lie (ἐν τῷ ψεύδει [*en tō pseudei*]), a falsification of reality which distorts all man's perception (vv 21-22) and consequent attitudes and conduct. Paul would certainly affirm that the typical association between pagan idolatry and sexual license was no accident: the more base the perception of God, the more base the worship and corresponding conduct appropriate to it."⁹⁰

Some of us may need to be reminded of the scene in 2 Maccabees 6:4, when the Jerusalem Temple was profaned by the Seleucids: "For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with harlots and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit." This is a major part of the kind of sexual perversion that results from idolatry.

26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

1:26-27 Paul has just stated how generally speaking, idolatry has led to sexual perversion—which is the exact view of Wisdom 14:12: "For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life." While there are many perversions which can occur in association with male and female heterosexual activity, of significant repugnance was the adoption of homosexuality by both men and women:

"Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (NIV).

Homosexual activity, whether it takes place among females or males, is labeled by Paul to be *paraphusin* (παρὰ φύσιν), "against nature" (ASV, TLV), "contrary to nature" (ESV), or "unnatural" (RSV,

⁹⁰ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:63.

NASU).⁹¹ While there are scores of heterosexual abominations which can take place, such as adultery (sexual intercourse that breaks the marriage commitment) or fornication (sexual intercourse outside of marriage), homosexuality is specifically labeled by Paul as something against nature, meaning against God's Creation intent.

Paul asserts how idolatry via the rejection of God has manifested itself in a perversion of God's intentions for heterosexual relations between a married man and woman. Homosexual intercourse not only is unnatural, but it completely distorts the Creator's purpose for making sexuality to be something that involves procreation (Genesis 1:28). Certainly within the Torah, both prohibited heterosexual and homosexual activities largely merited capital punishment—but the latter has a distinction of being contrary to nature, whereas at least heterosexual activity outside of Biblical parameters is at least biologically natural, even if immoral and unethical and damaging to families.

There has been no shortage of debate in the past several decades over the meaning and intention of **Romans 1:26-27** in Biblical Studies, especially given contemporary social debates over gays and lesbians, discrimination against homosexual people, gay marriage, and for various Protestant denominations, ordination of homosexual clergy as pastors and leaders. Within the scope of arguments which stand against the Apostle Paul considering male and female homosexual activity to be unnatural and an abomination to God, some have proposed that what is mainly in view is pederasty, principally including an older Greek or Roman man and much younger boy having sexual intercourse. Dunn, quite properly, notes that all forms of homosexual activity are forbidden by Paul:

“The whole phrase (τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι [*tēn aschēmosunēn katergazomenoi*], ‘committing the shameless act’) indicates clearly that not merely homosexual tendency or desire is in view, but the genital act itself...[Some suggest] that Paul has in mind here pederasty in particular, but Paul's indictment seems to include all kinds of homosexual practice, female as well as male, and was not directed against one kind of homosexual practice in distinction from another.”⁹²

At the very most, what can probably be conceded from ancient classical history, is that many who practiced homosexual intercourse, were more what we might consider bisexual than strictly homosexual. Many younger Greek and Roman men, before marrying, could have had intercourse with younger boys, female prostitutes, and their male contemporaries. Precisely because homosexual intercourse is so unnatural and contrary to God's Creation intent, though, it did tend to receive a great deal of condemnation in ancient Jewish thought—precisely the worldview held by the Apostle Paul. Even if prohibited homosexual intercourse was coupled with prohibited heterosexual intercourse, **it is all still sin**. Edwards appropriately summarizes,

“Paul's attitude toward homosexuality was unambiguous; these verses cannot be construed to argue that Paul regarded homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle acceptable to God. It is common today to hear that Paul's pronouncements on this subject were historically and culturally conditioned and thus are no longer morally valid...Paul condemns homosexuality not primarily on moral but on theological grounds. Moreover, although Paul stood within Judaism, which strictly condemned homosexuality, he was writing to a primarily Gentile audience which held a vastly different attitude towards it. Studies of primitive and ancient societies reveal that fully two-thirds of them affirmed homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle...The Greco-Roman world belonged to this number, sometimes viewing homosexuality and pederasty as a higher form of sexuality.”⁹³

Today's conservative evangelical Christians rightly oppose homosexuality on Biblical grounds, but frequently lack the background information they need to recognize how someone like Paul really

⁹¹ For a useful summary, in a relatively popular resource, consult the article “Homosexuality in the Ancient world,” in Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1836.

⁹² Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:65.

⁹³ Edwards, pp 55-56; cf. also Keener, pp 35-40; Kruse, pp 109-115.

did consider homosexual behavior to be prohibited. (Christians who believe that the Torah of Moses has been abolished, even just the perceived “moral law” of the Pentateuch, have a much more difficult case to make against homosexuality than Christian theological traditions which do believe in the moral and ethical commandments still being valid.) Even various Messianic people, who rightly affirm that God’s Torah is valid instruction upheld by Yeshua the Messiah, and that homosexual behavior is wrong, need to be know a few more things about homosexuality within the Second Temple period. We all need to have some information on hand when we encounter a progressive Christian friend or colleague who thinks that homosexual intercourse or gay relationships or gay marriage are permissible, when we go to them with a passage like Romans 1:26-28. The following chart has summarized a selection of significant quotes from the Tanach, Apostolic Scriptures, ancient Jewish literature, as well as the Greek philosopher Plato, on the issue of homosexuality. Harrison actually makes the assumption, “Undoubtedly, the synagogues of the Dispersion made use of material of this kind in trying to proselytize Gentiles.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Harrison, in *EXP*, 10:27.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM	
TANACH	ANCIENT JEWISH LITERATURE
<p>"You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination" (Leviticus 18:22).</p> <p>"If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them" (Leviticus 20:13).</p> <p>"[A]nd they called to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them'" (Genesis 19:5).</p> <p>"While they were celebrating, behold, the men of the city, certain worthless fellows, surrounded the house, pounding the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man, saying, 'Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations with him'" (Judges 19:22).</p> <p>"There were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel" (1 Kings 14:24).</p> <p>"He [Josiah] also broke down the houses of the <i>male</i> cult prostitutes which <i>were</i> in the house of the LORD, where the women were weaving hangings for the Asherah" (2 Kings 23:7).</p> <p>"Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah....The expression of their faces bears witness against them, and they display their sin like Sodom; they do not <i>even</i> conceal it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves" (Isaiah 1:9; 3:9).</p>	<p>"For whether they kill children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange customs, they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously kill one another, or grieve one another by adultery, and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors, pollution of souls, sex perversion, disorder in marriage, adultery, and debauchery. For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil" (Wisdom 14:23-27).</p> <p>"And let the man who is devoted to the love of boys submit to the same punishment, since he pursues that pleasure which is contrary to nature, and since, as far as depends upon him, he would make the cities desolate, and void, and empty of all inhabitants, wasting his power of propagating his species, and moreover, being a guide and teacher of those greatest of all evils, unmanliness and effeminate lust, stripping young men of the flower of their beauty, and wasting their prime of life in effeminacy, which he ought rather on the other hand to train to vigor and acts of courage; and last of all, because, like a worthless husbandman, he allows fertile and productive lands to lie fallow, contriving that they shall continue barren, and labors night and day at cultivating that soil from which he never expects any produce at all" (Philo <i>Special Laws</i> 3.39).⁹⁵</p> <p>"As men, being unable to bear discreetly a satiety of these things, get restive like cattle, and become stiff-necked, and discard the laws of nature, pursuing a great and intemperate indulgence of gluttony, and drinking, and unlawful connections; for not only did they go mad after women, and defile the marriage bed of others, but also those who were men lusted after one another, doing unseemly things, and not regarding or respecting their common nature, and though eager for children, they were convicted by having only an abortive offspring; but the conviction produced no advantage, since they were overcome by violent desire....But God, having taken pity on mankind, as being a Savior and full of love for mankind, increased, as far as possible, the natural desire of men and women for a connection together, for the sake of producing children, and detesting the unnatural and unlawful commerce of the people of Sodom, he extinguished it, and destroyed those who were inclined to these things, and that not by any ordinary chastisement, but he inflicted on them an astonishing novelty, and unheard of rarity of vengeance" (Philo <i>On Abraham</i> 135, 137).⁹⁶</p> <p>"Circumstances may make you treat this subject either light-heartedly or seriously; in either case you ought to bear in mind that when male and female come together to have a child, the pleasure they experience seems to arise entirely naturally. But homosexual intercourse and lesbianism seem to be unnatural crimes of the first rank, and are committed because men and women cannot control their desire for pleasure" (Plato <i>Laws</i> 1.2).⁹⁷</p>

⁹⁵ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 598.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

⁹⁷ Plato: *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp 18-19.

“Circumstances may make you treat this subject either light-heartedly or seriously; in either case you ought to bear in mind that when male and female come together to have a child, the pleasure they experience seems to arise entirely naturally. But homosexual intercourse and lesbianism seem to be unnatural crimes of the first rank, and are committed because men and women cannot control their desire for pleasure” (Plato *Laws* 1.2).⁹⁸

APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURES

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

“[U]nderstanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:9-10, ESV).

In looking at some of these significant Biblical, extra-Biblical, and even classical views of homosexuality, it is right to recognize how unnatural or contrary to nature homosexual intercourse is. But at the same time, the Holy Scriptures have far more to communicate to heterosexuals involved in improper relationships, and too many contemporary Believers will turn a blind eye to inappropriate heterosexual activities and sex outside of marriage, while fiercely condemning homosexual activities. A much fairer scale is needed. Even many of today’s Messianic Believers, who try to adhere to a morality and ethics deeply rooted within Moses’ Teaching, need to improve their attitude toward gays and lesbians, loving them with the love of Yeshua, and praying for their repentance. *And we need to do the same thing toward those involved in inappropriate heterosexual activities as well.* For, two gay men in some kind of long-term commitment to one another, are just as much sinners as the fraternity brother who sleeps with a different woman every night. The former might be biologically unnatural (*paraphusin*)—but the latter is degrading to females, and would see them as nothing more than objects to be used. Paul would condemn both with “God delivered them over in the cravings of their hearts to sexual impurity, so that their bodies were degraded among themselves” (v. 24, HCSB). At the same time, though, the power of the gospel is decisively present to help all be delivered from sexual sin—and the capital penalties of sexual sin were absorbed by Yeshua onto His cross (Colossians 2:14).

Many of us utterly lament the fact that significant denominations in both Judaism and Christianity are splitting over the issue of homosexuality and gay clergy—and much of this is directly caused by those who believe that the Torah or Law of Moses is a thing of the past. Frequently, it needs to be remembered that when a number of Protestant denominations have voted to condemn the State of Israel for its handling of Palestinian issues, voting to loosen restrictions on gays and lesbians as ordained pastors or leaders has frequently also taken place, or happens to be the “other issue” which the denomination is dealing with. *Is there at all a connection between these issues?* At the very least, we should be able to recognize how there continues to be a steady slide into an amoral abyss as the return of Yeshua draws near. If, as Messianics, we feel that our faith community is under attack when the State of Israel is attacked—we also need to remember that Biblical sexuality is also likely to be attacked at the same time.

⁹⁸ Plato: *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp 18-19.

Excursus: Homosexuality—“Against Nature” or “Beyond Nature”?⁹⁹

Paul’s letter to the Romans is often considered to be his theological *magnum opus*, and for good reasons. It is a well drawn out presentation on the gospel as he proclaims it among the nations, as Paul is preparing to move to the Western Mediterranean, and wants the Roman Believers to know what the mission is that the Lord has entrusted to him. Most expositors agree that Romans was written against a backdrop of either Corinth or Achaia, and such places were harbingers of gross sexual sin, likely affecting Paul’s choice of words. It should thus be no surprise that Paul considers idolatry *and* inappropriate sexual behavior as direct consequences of the fall of humanity. As he describes,

“For they exchanged the truth of 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 over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error” (Romans 1:25-27).

The traditional interpretation of this text throughout centuries of Christian theology **has undoubtedly and undeniably viewed it as relating to homosexuality**. Only in recent days as homosexuality has become legal in the West and acceptable as an “alternative lifestyle” have some liberal Christian theologians viewed Romans 1:26-27 as relating to behavior *other than* homosexual intercourse. Skewed definitions of Biblical concepts are appearing in some theological resources, as *EDB* summarizes, “The Bible does not appear to say anything directly about homosexuality in this modern sense of the term, but a few passages do refer to same gender genital acts.”¹⁰⁰ It goes on to say, in regard to verses such as Genesis 18:16-33 and Leviticus 18:22; 20:1, “None of [these passages] appears to address modern questions directly.”¹⁰¹

The debate in favor of homosexuality from liberal theologians often focuses on the so-called “relational” side, arguing that since the Bible does not directly address the modern questions of commitment between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, it could thus be acceptable as “love” is the principal thrust of the gospel. Even a number of evangelicals who would strongly oppose today’s Messianic movement and its emphasis on a Torah foundation, still will agree that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul is speaking about homosexuality and considers it a gross sin. Witherington candidly states, “Vv. 26-27 are about as clear a condemnation of homosexual and lesbian behavior as exists in the NT,”¹⁰² even though he provides no Tanach references in favor or support of Paul’s position.

Evangelical Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser—who holds to a much higher view of the Torah in his theology, from the Reformed tradition—represents a standard conservative view, summarizing,

“To prohibit homosexuality today, some would argue, would be like forbidding unclean meats. It is admitted, of course, that there is a category of temporary ceremonial laws, but I do not agree that homosexuality is among them. Nothing in its proscription points to or anticipates Christ, and the death penalty demanded for its violation places it in the moral realm and not in temporary ceremonial legislation.”¹⁰³

Those in the Jewish Synagogue today who believe that homosexuality is a valid behavior are consequently often very liberal, believing only that a cultural Judaism is what God asks of His people. And that cultural Judaism is very much pick-and-choose, “changing” with the times!

⁹⁹ This material in this section directly benefits from a three-week segment of examinations and lectures from the author’s Spring 2007 Exegesis of Romans class at Asbury Theological Seminary.

¹⁰⁰ L. Wm. Countryman, “Homosexuality,” in *EDB*, 602.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 603.

¹⁰² Witherington, 69.

¹⁰³ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 118.

It is, of course, very important to understand the worldview of the Apostle Paul when writing vs. 26-27. This is not an issue that is going away, and we need to be prepared to directly encounter it should homosexual issues arise in our Messianic communities, or more likely we find people asking honest questions about it in the context of sexual ethics from Scripture.

Paul remarks that as a direct result of the Fall, human beings have rejected the primacy of God in their lives: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (NIV). He then goes on to say, “their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (vs. 26b-27a, ESV).

Because of discussions circulating today not only in society, but also in theology, it is absolutely critical that Believers understand the distinct worldview of Paul—so as to accurately understand what he is telling the Romans. It is not uncommon for some to conclude that only homosexual activity involved with idolatry, rather than homosexual intercourse independent of such religious practice, is only what is being talked about.

We should begin by asking ourselves how the good Rabbi from Tarsus, a Pharisee trained by Gamaliel, would have thought about homosexuality from the Torah and Tanach.

Paul very clearly says that due to the curse on the world, men and women have both exchanged natural functions for unnatural functions. When God created man and woman, He made them in His own image (Genesis 1:27), and decreed “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). In Genesis 2:18-24, we see how God made woman to be the man’s equal partner:

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’ Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul directly appeal to Genesis 2:24 regarding the Divine estate of marriage (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7, 8; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31). God originally made the woman to be the life partner and significant ally of the man—not another man for the man—so that the two might reproduce and tend the wonderful Creation that He made for both of them. Acceptance of anything other than relations between a man and a woman mars not only God’s original intention for them as “one flesh,” but also the fact that human beings have been created in His image and for His Divine purposes. Furthermore, as Moo points out, “it is clear that Paul depicts homosexual activity as a violation of God’s creation order, another indication of the departure from true knowledge and worship of God.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, it can be easily seen that homosexual acts are not only sinful, but they are **idolatrous in and of themselves** as men and women “worship themselves” in a reality that is seen outside of the realm decreed by the Lord.

The fact that prohibitions against homosexual activities are seen in the Torah should be self-obvious to this discussion:

“You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22).

¹⁰⁴ Moo, 115.

“If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them” (Leviticus 20:13).

The commands *v’et-zakar lo tishkav mishkevei ishah* (וְאִתְּזָכֵר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה) in Leviticus 18:22a, and *v’ish asher yishkav et-zakar mishkevei ishah* (אִשֶּׁר יִשְׁכַּב אִתְּזָכֵר מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה) in Leviticus 20:13a, both concern a man “lying” with another man—as he would with a woman. Clearly, some kind of sexual intercourse is what is in mind. The verb *shakav* (שָׁכַב) or “to lie down” can very much have connotations “to lie down and have sexual intercourse” (*HALOT*).¹⁰⁵ The Lord is very clear in that He considers this behavior to be *toevah* (תּוֹעֵבָה) or an “abomination.” The severity of this act once merited capital punishment.

The first major instance we see regarding homosexuality in the Torah concerns the men of Sodom wanting to burst into the home of Lot, and gang rape his angelic visitors:

“Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them.’ But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, ‘Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly’” (Genesis 19:4-7).

Here, the outcry of the men of Sodom is “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them” (NIV). The verb *yada* (יָדָע) or “to know” is used to describe this demand, and in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice) it can certainly mean “to know sexually, have intercourse with, **copulate**” (*HALOT*).¹⁰⁶ A similar instance is seen in Judges 19:22, clearly attesting that the Ancient Israelites encountered homosexual activities among the Canaanites:

“While they were celebrating, behold, the men of the city, certain worthless fellows, surrounded the house, pounding the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man, saying, ‘Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations [*yada*; ‘have sex,’ NIV] with him.’”

The Apostle Paul’s training in the morality of the Hebrew Tanach would certainly never allow him to accept homosexual intercourse or relationships as a valid practice for the faith community. Not only did it go against God’s intention at Creation for the man and woman to reproduce, but the examples seen in the Tanach of homosexual behavior often associate it with violence. From a First Century Jewish perspective, acceptance of any kind of homosexuality **was never an option**. Homosexuality was a perversion to be associated with the pagan Gentiles, and to say otherwise is to create an artificial world of the First Century Synagogue that never existed. Dunn indicates,

“In the Greco-Roman world homosexuality was quite common and even highly regarded...It was a feature of social life, indulged in not least by the gods...and emperors...But Jewish reaction to it as a perversion, a pagan abomination, is consistent throughout the OT.”¹⁰⁷

What is interesting about Paul, is that even though his declarations against homosexuality are firmly rooted within the Torah and Tanach—is that in writing to the Romans he makes use of some important classical terms that also describe the practice. He uses *tēn phusikēn* (τὴν φυσικὴν) to describe the “natural function” (NASU) or “natural relations” (RSV) between men and women. Cranfield concurs that by using this, “Paul clearly means ‘in accordance with the intention of the Creator’...For this appeal to ‘nature’ in the sense of the order manifest in the created world compare 1 Cor 11:14, where ἡ φύσις αὐτῆ [hē phusis autē] might almost be translated ‘the very way God has made us’.”¹⁰⁸ Dunn states that *phusis* (φύσις) “is not a Hebrew concept...The concept

¹⁰⁵ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:1487.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:391.

¹⁰⁷ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:65.

¹⁰⁸ Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, pp 123-124.

is primarily Greek, and typically Stoic—to live in harmony with the natural order and its divine rationality.”¹⁰⁹ In writing to a predominantly non-Jewish audience in Rome, Paul feels at liberty to use terminology that they are familiar with to communicate the moral truths of God’s Torah.

Today among some liberal scholars *para phusin* (παρὰ φύσιν) or what is “against nature” is sometimes argued to not necessarily concern condemnation upon homosexuality. Instead, some suggest that Paul is speaking against heterosexuals engaged in unwarranted homosexuality, which would be contrary to one’s predetermined disposition. This view is intended to provide theological support for the concept that some are homosexual, and others are heterosexual, from the time of birth. With this in mind, rather than male or female homosexuality stemming as a result of man and woman’s fall and rejection of God, all that Paul is condemning is homosexual behavior on the part of heterosexuals, likely in the context of Roman temple prostitution or religious rites.

Furthermore, lexical support for the homosexual agenda may be provided as the preposition *para*, when joined with an accusative noun (indicating direct object) can mean “more than” or “rather than” (*CGEDNT*).¹¹⁰ To soften the blow it is said, Paul is really just speaking about things “more than nature” or “rather than nature.”¹¹¹ So from this angle, Paul certainly cannot be condemning two men or two women in a committed relationship—that just or simply “goes beyond” Creation’s purpose of a union resulting in childbearing. Yet this line of reasoning makes a severe and fatal flaw: it assumes that the term *para phusin* is used only by Paul, and has no parallels in ancient literature.

The Jewish historian Josephus employs *para phusin* to describe homosexual activities:

“[W]hat reason can there be why we should desire to imitate the laws of other nations, while we see they are not observed by their own legislators? And why do not the Lacedemonians [Spartans] think of abolishing that form of their government which suffers them not to associate with any others, as well as their contempt of matrimony? And why do not the Eleans and Thebans abolish that **unnatural** [*para phusin*] and impudent lust, **which makes them lie with males?**” (*Against Apion* 2.273).¹¹²

“[T]he Greeks...ascribed...sodomitical practices to the gods themselves, as a part of their good character; and, indeed, it was according to the same manner that the gods married their own sisters. This the Greeks contrived as an apology for their own absurd and **unnatural** [*para phusin*] pleasures” (*Against Apion* 2.275).¹¹³

In these two quotations from Josephus, he criticizes the homosexuality of the Spartans, and later how the Greek religion allowed for homosexual activities among their gods (as well as incest). *Para phusin* is used to describe these sinful acts.

The Jewish philosopher Philo also had a great disdain for homosexual activities, in describing the men of Sodom (*On Abraham* 133-141). His scathing words against them testify,

“As men, being unable to bear discreetly a satiety of these things, get restive like cattle, and become stiff-necked, and discard the laws of nature, pursuing a great and intemperate indulgence of gluttony, and drinking, and unlawful connections; for not only did they go mad after women, and defile the marriage bed of others, **but also those who were men lusted after one another,**

¹⁰⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:64.

¹¹⁰ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971), 131.

¹¹¹ The clause *para phusin* is rendered as “other than nature” in The Source New Testament; “contrary to their own natures” in The Inclusive Bible.

¹¹² Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 811.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

doing unseemly things, and not regarding or respecting their common nature” (*On Abraham* 135).¹¹⁴

Here, Philo expands the sins of the men of Sodom as first involving the rape of women, but later devolving into homosexual activities. He says that they had no regard for *ton tēs phuseōs nomon* (τὸν τῆς φύσεως νόμον) or “the laws of nature,” clearly being guided by a Torah ethic.

These examples from Josephus and Philo, of course, appear in the milieu of Hellenistic Jewish literature. They attest that *para phusin* or “against nature” clearly does relate to homosexual activities that were considered abominable in the sight of God. Many of the Jews in Rome would have known how the Diaspora Synagogue could have adopted “*para phusin*” to refer to such an abominable Gentile sexual act. Yet, what really nails the coffin for those arguing that *para phusin* does not refer to homosexuality—is that ***para phusin* was used in a classical context to refer to homosexuality**, independent of its Jewish usage. Richard B. Hays remarks,

“There are abundant instances, both in the Greco-Roman moral philosophers and in literary texts, of the opposition between ‘natural’ (*kata physin*) and ‘unnatural’ (*para physin*) behavior...In particular, the opposition between ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ is very frequently used...as a way of distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual behavior.”¹¹⁵

Hays gives a variety of examples from classical literature, where *para phusin* is clearly used to refer to homosexuality:

“Plutarch has Daphnaeus, one of the speakers in his *Dialogue on Love*, disparage ‘union contrary to nature with males’ (*hē para physin homilia pros arrēnas*), as contrasted to ‘the love between men and women,’ which is characterized as ‘natural’ (*tē physei*). A few sentences later, Daphnaeus complains that those who ‘consort with males’ willingly are guilty of ‘weakness and effeminacy,’ because ‘contrary to nature (*para physin*),’ they ‘allow themselves in Plato’s words “to be covered and mounted like cattle”’ (*Dialogue on Love* 751C, E). Plutarch’s reference to Plato demonstrates the point that Paul did not originate the application of the *kata physin/para physin* dichotomy to heterosexual and homosexual behavior. Its common appearance in the writings of the Hellenistic moral philosophers is testimony to a convention which can be traced back at least as far as Plato (*Laws* I.636C), almost variably in contexts where a negative judgment is pronounced on the morality or propriety of the ‘unnatural’ homosexual relations.”¹¹⁶

In Plato’s *Laws*, a defense of the Athenian style of life is seen when compared against that of the Spartans and Cretans. An Athenian is attested as saying,

“For instance, these gymnastic exercises and common meals, useful though they are to a state in many ways, are a danger of their encouragement in revolution...More especially, the very antiquity of these practices seems to have corrupted the natural pleasures of sex, which are common to man and beast. For these perversions, your two states may well be the first to be blamed, as well as others that make a particular point of gymnastic exercises. Circumstances may make you treat the subject either light-heartedly or seriously; in either case you ought to bear in mind that when male and female come together in order to have a child, the pleasure they experience seems to arise entirely naturally. But homosexual intercourse and lesbianism seem to be unnatural crimes of the first rank, and are committed because men and women cannot control their desire for pleasure” (*The Laws* 1.636c).¹¹⁷

Here, we have some direct attestations about how *para phusin* was used among classical philosophers to refer to homosexuality, and even how perverse these pagan philosophers considered the practice. These Hellenistic witnesses agree that male and female homosexuality were viewed as being forbidden and taboo.

¹¹⁴ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 397.

¹¹⁵ Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 1 [1986]: 192.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹¹⁷ Plato, *Laws*, pp 18-19.

The Apostle Paul's Jewish training and high regard for the Torah of Moses would never have permitted him to concede that homosexuality was anything less than an abomination. Furthermore, the attestation that *para phusin* or "against nature" is used in classical literature to refer to homosexuality—and that the Jewish Paul and Greek philosophers **actually agree on its perverseness**—strengthens the case against it, and surely does not weaken it. The propagation of homosexual activity is a rejection of God's will for man and woman to procreate, and one of the human principal acts of rebellion against His authority to be equated as idolatry against Him as an act of self-worship.

Those who would argue that *para phusin* can mean something other than "against nature"—and not be a direct reference to homosexuality—have committed extreme eisegetical error. They have read a modern social situation into an ancient text, and have ignored sound hermeneutical skills. Not only have advocates of the homosexual agenda severely misapplied Romans 1:26-27, but they have created an artificial construct by which to at best allow (as seen in the errant translations "more than nature" or "rather than nature"), and at worst actually condone, homosexual intercourse and relationships (the majority of which are not "monogamous").

The larger issue that is asked of us as Believers in Yeshua, particularly as it concerns gays and lesbians today, is that although their actions are clearly opposed by Scripture—how do we treat them as fellow human beings? In Romans 1:26-27 Paul neither asks nor answers the question how a Believer is to specifically regard a homosexual man or woman. Kaiser's thoughts are well taken:

"Homosexuality must be listed as a sexual perversion, a defilement of a country in which it is practiced, and an abomination in God's eyes. Anything less than this is a form of specious reasoning. It is a sin that must be dealt with as any other sin even though the gospel also offers freedom, forgiveness, and healing from this sin as from any other—or it is no gospel at all."¹¹⁸

Indeed, Yeshua's declaration to those in His home synagogue at Nazareth speak volumes to this problem:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18, ESV; cf. Isaiah 61:1).

Witherington is one who thinks that in Romans 1:26-27, "Paul speaks of actions, not inclinations, attitudes or genetics."¹¹⁹ Yet, the person who thinks about homosexual acts is just as guilty as the one "who looks at a woman with lust for her [and who] has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Many people engulfed in the sin of homosexuality, no different than those engulfed in heterosexual adultery, are looking for acceptance and love. Homosexuals are those who have been unable to find any kind of acceptance or love among the opposite gender, and so they look to their own gender to find it. Certainly while Paul considers the actions of homosexuality to be unacceptable; the thoughts of homosexuality are equally as unacceptable. Paul states that such people will receive "the appropriate penalty for their perversion" (HCSB).

The transforming power of the Messiah Yeshua to not only proclaim the good news of His Kingdom, but also the proclamation of liberty to captives and the oppressed, can release people from the power of homosexuality. Only when a homosexual person recognizes the sinfulness of his or her act, confesses of such sin, and then asks for God's transforming power to change him or her—can *His overwhelming love* engulf that person in the acceptance that was sought via homosexuality. But this acceptance is unconditional, it is restorative, and it goes above and beyond what any kind of sexual act can bring. It is the love of our Heavenly Father toward a child that has returned to Him and His desiring to live by His original intention at Creation. We must be there as His representatives and ambassadors—the Body of Messiah (Him working through us)—to offer the freedom from bondage that only Yeshua provides.

¹¹⁸ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 197.

¹¹⁹ Witherington, 69.

The issue of homosexuality is not going away anytime soon, especially with the homosexual agenda and political bloc for gay rights that have emerged on the world scene. Today, many Christian denominations are dividing over this issue. Many evangelicals are greatly concerned that a firm Biblical ethic is being tossed out the window in favor of extreme compromise with sin. As many evangelicals leave their denominations, this is where only the Messianic movement in the future can offer a valid **and more consistent** theological perspective given our high view of the Torah. In the future, we could actually see ourselves significantly swell in numbers. Yet in order to do this, we must become a more stable and mature spiritual movement, and engage more with the world as God's Word does indeed have answers for those in bondage!¹²⁰

28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

1:28-31 Fallen humanity is one sorry sight to behold, in the view of Paul. "Moreover, since they considered themselves too high and mighty to acknowledge God, he allowed them to become the slaves of their degenerate minds, and to perform unmentionable deeds" (v. 28, Phillips New Testament). The world at large is said to be those "having been filled with all unrighteousness" (v. 29a, Brown and Comfort),¹²¹ *peplērōmenous pasē adikia* (πεπληρωμένους πάση ἀδικία), and Paul goes on to list a variety of these negative traits:

"[W]ickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful" (vs. 29b-31).

Two terms in v. 31, which should grab readers' attention when read in an edition like the American Standard Version (and also the Hebrew Names Version), are "covenant-breakers, without natural affection," *asunthetous astorgous* (ἀσυνθέτους ἀστοργούς). Frequently rendered as "untrustworthy" (NASU) or "faithless" (RSV), the term *asunthetos* (ἀσύνθετος), "*bound by no covenant, faithless*" (LS),¹²² "**pert. to such as renege on their word, faithless.** The noun συνθήκη [*sunthēkē*] refers to a formal agreement or compact; an ἀσύνθετος [*asunthetos*] pers. does not keep an agreement" (BDAG).¹²³ "Agreement-breakers" might be a better translation for *asunthetous*. Similarly, in view of the sexual sins previously described in ch. 1, *astorgos* (ἄστοργος), "*without natural affection*" (LS),¹²⁴ while involving "**hardhearted, unfeeling, without regard for others**" (BDAG),¹²⁵ often rendered as "heartless" (RSV) or "no love" (NIV), is probably better left as "without natural affection."

1:32 Paul closes up his statements on the sinfulness of the nations at large, with an intriguing assertion. He says, "although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

¹²⁰ A further analysis of this debate, offering both pro- and con- positions, is Dan O. Via and Robert A.J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

¹²¹ Brown and Comfort, 534.

¹²² LS, 127.

¹²³ BDAG, 146.

¹²⁴ LS, 125.

¹²⁵ BDAG, 146.

How are we to understand what *to dikaiōma tou Theou* (τὸ δικάϊωμα τοῦ θεοῦ) is, here in v. 32, invariably translated as “God's decree” (RSV/NRSV/ESV), “God's righteous decree” (NIV), or even “the righteous order of God” (LITV)? Surely, this cannot be viewed as the nations, who have rejected the Creator God, as having specific knowledge of God's commandments in the Torah. It would have to, rather, involve those instructions regarding basic morality imprinted onto the conscience via His image (v. 19). According to Paul's assessment of humankind, people have enough basic intelligence and reason regarding right and wrong, that when a whole host of sins are committed, they know that it will merit them some kind of penalties in the hereafter from a Supreme Being. To a degree, what Paul says here is paralleled by Epictetus' word, “There are certain punishments laid down, as though by law, for those who disobey the divine governance” (*Discourses* 3.11.1).¹²⁶

Consider what you would be doing, if you were a Jewish Believer sitting in an assembly or fellowship of Roman Messiah followers, having just heard vs. 1-32 read to you over the course of around 10-20 minutes. You would definitely see that Paul's condemning words of sin, in ch. 1, have placed him into the category of those ancient Jewish leaders, which recognized the nations of Earth as largely being idolatrous and sexually immoral. Paul laments over this, and wants to see all come to a proper knowledge of “the Creator, who is blessed forever” (v. 25). What you may not have caught, is that the nations' idolatry is crafted in the language of Ancient Israel's idolatry, and that while Paul agrees that the nations at large are sinners against the Creator God, the Jewish people themselves are not exempt from any of this, either. Wright directs our attention,

“Though the spearhead of this attack (1:18-2:26) corresponds to regular Jewish polemic against the pagan world, Paul sharpens it up with specifically Christian notes, and he hints that Israel itself is included in the general indictment. He turns in 2:17-29 specifically to his own people, the Jews; while endorsing their claim to be the people chosen by God to bring light to the world, their own prophets indicate that they have failed in this vocation and are in danger...”¹²⁷

Romans ch. 2, as will become clear, does issue some admonishing words against First Century Jewish possession of the Torah, as though having the Torah's instruction somehow means that God will give His people some sort of special favors. On the contrary, the Torah that Paul's fellow Jews possess, condemns them for their failures just as much as it condemns the world at large. Hence, a significant answer—**that of Yeshua the Messiah**—is decisively needed to solve the problem.

¹²⁶ Epictetus: *The Discourses*, ed. Christopher Gill (London: Everyman, 1995), 173.

¹²⁷ Wright, in *NIB*, 10:413.