

## NEW THOUGHTS ON AN OLD DEBATE: Homosexuality Today, Homoeroticism Then

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Debate in major mainline protestant churches (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, United Methodist, Church of Christ, etc.) on the subject of homosexuality has, in the opinion of many, been "done to death." What's left to discuss? Despite extensive, expensive and often divisive studies ordered on the subject and conducted by experts in Biblical and psychological studies, several of these denominations have retained official positions that insist the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, and they continue to point to the Bible (both Hebrew and Christian Testaments) for support.

Too many church members think the matter is simple, wonder what all the fuss is about and resist being informed otherwise. Why? I think it stems partly from the sheer complexity of our lives here at the beginning of the third millennium that leaves us desperately seeking simplicity in *something*. "Tell me 'yes' or tell me 'no,' but please don't tell me 'it's complicated!'" Many don't feel that they have the mental energy to devote to sorting it out.

But I think it's more than that, at least for some. An admission of the complexity behind the question might lead us to a serious reassessment of certain cherished biases. To quote Sir Kenneth Dover (eminent British classicist) on homosexuality: "I know of no topic in classical studies on which a scholar's normal ability to perceive differences and draw inferences is so easily impaired" (*Greek Homosexuality*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1989: vii).

The same can be said for most people, I fear.

*But this subject is complex.* To pretend otherwise reduces dialogue to thirty-second sound-bites that trivialize our humanity. It is NOT simple, and those who insist it is are

deceiving themselves.

When one emerges from the other end of detailed study, including a study of Greek social history, the only possible conclusion is that the New Testament does not address homosexuality *as we understand it* at all. Their world was NOT ours; their culture was not ours. Our concept of homosexuality is a *modern* construct reflecting *modern* psychological viewpoints that differ in fundamental ways from the worldview of the ancients. Too many people insist that the New Testament is "perfectly clear" in its condemnation, but make that claim without understanding what the Bible actually *says*, not to mention the larger culture that produced the text. Some may still conclude that the Bible condemns homosexuality, but I honestly can't understand how anybody can believe their ideas of sex (and sexuality) are anything like ours. Some things may be a matter of debate. Other things are not.

In some ways, the ancients were very much like us. A young Roman soldier on duty at Hadrian's Wall in England wrote home to request warm socks; an Egyptian girl away at school wrote to her parents, letting them know she was fine; graffiti in Greek and Roman cities was ubiquitous and covered the same subjects one might find on any bathroom wall today (minus the phone numbers, of course). They put up gravestones to honor their dead, laughed at silly puns in the theater, and valued their freedom.

But in other ways, the ancients were not like us. Greco-Roman culture regularly exposed unwanted infants "to the will of the Fates," and saw slavery as perfectly acceptable -- but a slavery that had little to do with race. Aristotle taught that women occupied a status somewhere between men and trained dogs. Death and blood in the Roman gladiatorial arena was real, not FX or computer graphics. Ancient Greek city-states declared peace, not war, war being the normal order of things, and casual violence in war was so common that Alexander the

Great excited no little comment (and censure) for pardoning a Theban woman who had killed one of his own officers because the man had raped her. (But if Timoklea had been a slave rather than sister to a general and wealthy by birth, he'd done nothing of the kind.)

Culture colors perceptions and creates assumptions so basic that we barely realize they *are* assumptions. When two cultures face each other across 2000+ years, it's across a *deep* chasm indeed. Paul Veyne said, "Far from being the most simple realistic experience, truth is the most historical . . . truths are already products of the imagination . . . [and] this imagination is . . . historical: for cultures succeed one another, and each one is different" (*Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths*, P. Wissing, trans, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988: xii).

Most mainline protestant churches today are not Biblical literalists, but employ a combination of tradition, reason, and experience in their scriptural interpretation. Therefore, advances in classical scholarship, Biblical studies, or modern psychology cannot be ignored when engaging in discussions of homosexuality. If they are, then these churches are being intellectually dishonest: adopting one set of standards for one situation, but another when it suits human prejudices. Either literalism is accepted -- without picking or choosing -- or the testimony of other disciplines *must* be permitted. There can be no halfway measures.

So, let us begin with basic semantics. If we can't agree on a vocabulary, we can't talk productively. There is no word in classical Greek for "homosexual." This may come as a surprise to those who check English translation of I Cor. 6:9 or I Tim. 1:10 only to find "homosexual" staring up at them. But the Greek word employed in these two passages is *arsenokoitai* – and it's an oddity. The word appears nowhere else in known Greek texts prior to Paul's use of it here. And for some time after, it appears *only* within the context of early church writings. It would seem that Paul coined it from the Septuagint (Greek) translation of a Hebrew

verb used in Leviticus, but we simply can't know for sure. In any case, it's not a regular Greek noun. The word means literally "the male ones who lie with males." (See W. L. Petersen, *Vigiliae Christianae* 40, 1986: 187-91.)

Today, we divide ourselves into various sexual categories: LGBTQI . . . that is, by our gender preference. This is largely *a foreign point of view* to the ancients. They categorized themselves not by preferred gender, but by *activity performed*. What mattered was *what* you did -- whether it was appropriate to your social station -- not who you did it with (except insofar as that reflected your social station). Greeks and Romans depended on social hierarchy to organize their world, and as long as an adult male maintained the rôle of pursuer and active agent (*erastes*, in Greek), then whether he pursued women, boys, or youths as *eromenoi* (beloveds) was irrelevant -- considered a matter of taste, as one might prefer blue shirts to red. (The reader is directed to Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin, *Before Sexuality*, Princeton University Press, 1990; or and especially to Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, Routledge, 1990: 41-53. For valid and important criticism of Halperin and Winkler's 'penetration model' in Roman imperial contexts, see work by David Fredrick.)

If we must choose a term to use for the ancients, we should probably restrict ourselves to "homoerotic" and "heteroerotic" -- terms which focus on *actions* rather than innate affective preferences.

Or -- in plain English -- the word 'homosexual' is *anachronistic* when applied to antiquity. I don't use it, and recommend that others dispense with it as well.

We shall return to why all the above matters in a debate concerning Paul and the New Testament, but while we're pursuing semantics and Greek thought, I wish to chase a tangent for a moment in order to head off at the pass an argument too often (mis)used concerning the categories of "natural" and "unnatural." Homosexuality is sometimes condemned not only as immoral but also "unnatural," with Plato's *Laws* [835D-842A] used in addition to the Bible to

prop up the contention. But if one follows careful and *comprehensive* study of these categories in general Greek thought from Archaic times through Hellenistic, one finds that Plato is unrepresentative. Greek thought employed three categories: natural or conventional (*kata phusin* or *kata nomon*), unconventional (*ou kata nomon*), and unnatural (*ou kata phusin*).

These do not mean what we think they do.

The Greeks considered homoerotic practices *unconventional*, not unnatural. For that matter, any sexual activity which placed the woman on top was unconventional. So, what was *unnatural*? Potted plants. Hot baths. Banquets after sunset. According to Seneca, anyway. But unnatural did not necessarily imply *immoral*. In sexual terms, unnatural acts included sex with dead bodies, with animals, or with inanimate objects . . . but also sex with gods. Anything not human. The former might be looked down on, or ridiculed, but the latter wasn't. (See J. J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, Routledge, 1990: 17-44.)

Given these definitions, we face an uncomfortable fact: by Greek standards, traditional Christian doctrine regarding Jesus' conception would make it *unnatural*. It might, therefore, be prudent to leave arguments that equate unnatural with immoral out of the discussion.

Returning to the fundamental issue of homosexuality/homoeroticism, between now and then, we've altered our understanding of how to categorize human beings. By behavior (then), or by psychological disposition (now)? People in different times and places can think very *differently* about quite basic things.

Again, the Greeks generally didn't worry much about who one had sex with, only with *what role* one took. Power and social position were the criteria. Among some groups, love between two men was considered superior because, of course, *men* were superior. Thus, love with an "inferior" woman would always be an inferior love. But even two men didn't have an equal partnership by our modern understanding. One member was always higher on the social

food chain. That doesn't mean they couldn't genuinely love and care for one another. What it does mean is that the ancient Greeks had an *entirely different set of assumptions* about what love and sex were for. We're back again to the idea that people in different times and places think differently about the fundamentals.

Yet we should also address popular Greek ridicule of homoerotic behavior, if Aristophanic comedy is any exemplar. Homoerotic attachments were seen by portions of the (Athenian) population as peculiar. The *why*, however, is critical. It concerns issues of **power** and **status** (like anything else in Greek culture). Homoeroticism was an aristocratic conceit -- a pastime too expensive for Joe-Average Greek in the fields or on the streets. The *erastes* (lover) was expected to buy expensive trinkets for his *eromenos* (beloved), not to mention the time spent in idle pursuit . . . time that was a luxury of the well-to-do.

Even in Rome it boiled down to status and power. Homoeroticism was part of Greek culture imported following the Punic Wars, a privilege of the Roman senatorial class and others with pretensions. Led by figures like Cato the Censor, conservative elements in Republican Rome condemned it, along with other things. They wished to reinstate good, old-fashioned Roman virtues and ideals, some of which would trouble the average church-goer today. We can't forget that figures on either side of the Hellenizing issue (Cato versus the Scipios) were *political enemies*, so what we hear must be sifted for rhetoric and bias in the service of *political* ends. The issue in the later Roman Empire grew even more complex, but it remained forever colored by the political quarrels surrounding the first significant arrival of Greek culture in Rome, during the 200s BCE.

So yes, there certainly were elements of ancient society that disapproved of homoerotic activity. Ancient society was no more monochromatic than modern society. "Where, when

and who” are always pertinent questions. Yet the reasons for the disapproval had more to do with socio-economic status and political jealousies than moral offense. Homoeroticism just wasn’t regarded with the same deep-seated hatred and fear that colors much modern rhetoric -- in churches and out. In its more extreme expressions, Greeks found it amusing, or a ripe topic for philosophic ridicule, but it could also be lauded in philosophic theory. (Plato, anyone?)

We should also beware of accepting *Athenian* attitudes -- whether Aristophanes’s against or Plato’s in favor -- as a standard for the rest of Greece. Despite her prestige, Athens was only *one* city-state, not universally admired, and atypical in several respects. Other city-states in Greece proper and in *Magna Graeca* (Greater Greece) -- not to mention the Hellenized communities of Italy, Sicily, Egypt, and Asia Minor -- could and did see things differently.

Homoerotic love was counted a greater spur to acts of honor, heroism, and courage than even love of family, particularly in battle contexts. The Sacred Band -- Thebes’s crack infantry unit -- was composed of 150 pairs of lovers who took a vow of loyalty to one another at the heroōn of Iolaos (beloved of Herakles) outside the Protiadēs Gates. They held firm . . . or they died. But they didn’t shame themselves before their lover by retreat. And those famous warriors, the Spartans -- "Come back with your shield or on it" -- were also noted for their homoerotic attachments, which could last well into adulthood. The elder lover could be held *publicly responsible* (and punished) for infractions on the part of his beloved. He also went shopping for him, and was generally invested with responsibility for training and inspiring him. Last, we can point to the 19+ year partnership of military genius Alexander the Great and his chief marshal, Hephaistion -- a relationship that, if different in form, was much like our modern marriage in terms of their emotional attachment. These are just a few of the better-known examples. Homoeroticism in military and athletic contexts was pursued in a variety of places:

Elis, Chalcis, Megara, Thessaly, Crete, Macedonia, and even Athens. (See Daniel Ogden, "Homosexuality and Warfare in Ancient Greece," *Battle in Antiquity*, A. B. Lloyd, ed, London, 1996, and also J. Reames-Zimmerman, "An Atypical Affair? Alexander the Great, Hephaestion and the nature of their relationship," *Ancient History Bulletin*, 13.3 (1999) 81-96.)

More to the point for the discussion at hand, homoeroticism was considered a matter of *personal choice* -- preference. As noted above, as long as the adult male citizen obeyed the rules of social convention and kept his proper rôle, then whether his beloved was an *eromena* (a girl) or an *eromenos* (a boy) mattered little. And because it *was* perceived as a matter of choice, not an inborn predisposition, ***it was believed to be open to change***. Today, of course, modern psychological research has shown overwhelmingly that it isn't, and in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) struck homosexuality from The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). One's affective orientation is considered by the vast bulk of mental-health professionals to be a natural, inborn predisposition cemented, if not before birth, then at least in the first year or so of life. "Ex-gay" programs are regarded as deceptive and actively harmful to the mental health of gay and lesbian persons. *In short, the modern perspective considers our affective/sexual preference to be a fundamental, inborn predisposition, NOT a matter of will or choice.*

And now we can deal with Paul and his New Testament letters. Saul was a Jew, a Pharisee by his own admission, educated under Rabbi Gamaliel. But *Paul* was a Hellenized native of the Cilician port city of Tarsus and the possessor of the much coveted *civitas optimo iure*, or full Roman citizenship (as opposed to partial status such as Latin Rights). Therefore, L. Aemilius Paulus Saul (the most likely form of his full Roman name) had a *Greco-Roman* worldview. As a student of Gamaliel, he would certainly have known his Hebrew, but his native language was *Greek*, not Aramaic, and even his brand of pharisaic Judaism seems to have



been peculiar, colored by Greek ideas. His letters in the New Testament dare not be read assuming a purely Hebrew worldview. In many ways, Paul was thoroughly “Greekified.”

Given his eclectic cultural background and his status as a mere artisan (a tent-maker), he would have viewed homoeroticism with working-class prejudices. Traditional Judaism forbid it, but Greek views didn’t . . . might even praise it, in certain contexts. Yet these were *aristocratic* ideals, and Paul was no Greek aristocrat.

In one important respect, however, Jewish and Greek beliefs didn’t differ. Homoerotic behavior was -- again -- thought to be a matter of *choice*, not an unchangeable aspect of personality. Therefore a man could be an *arsenokoitos* -- a male who lay with males -- but he couldn’t be a *homosexual* because that concept and word **SIMPLY DID NOT EXIST** . . . certainly not as we today understand it.

While I’m well aware that not everyone accepts the position held by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) that homosexuality, bisexuality, or etc., is a non-pathological disposition beyond anyone’s conscious decision, nonetheless, our entire modern approach to the question is from a radically *different* point of view than anything an ancient Greek, Roman *or* Jew would have understood. All Paul’s remarks about homoerotic activity must be viewed in light of his cultural assumptions. The New Testament does put forth certain standards of sexual behavior. Among these are mutuality, respect, and commitment. If we wish to apply *Biblical* ethics to modern homosexual attachments, these are the standards to consider. Literalist readings that result in blanket condemnations are inappropriate . . . unless we’re willing to accept the ancient worldview -- ALL the ancient worldview (and all traditional Jewish laws) -- along with ancient opinion about homoeroticism.

If, however, we accept what *modern* psychology teaches, and hold such modern views as

inherent horror at slavery and belief in the intellectual equality of women, then it's time and past time to revise church positions on homosexuality, because the New Testament doesn't address "*homosexuality*." It addresses something else. If we accept women in the pulpit in light of modern views about women, then likewise, we should accept gays and lesbians in the pulpit, or other positions of leadership, in light of modern understandings of homosexuality -- not ancient views concerning homoeroticism.

Anything else is intellectual dishonesty.

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**NB:** In-text citations should suffice for those seeking more complete textual [and contextual] evidence. This original article was written c. 1998, then revised slightly c. 2005. By 2015, almost twenty years after the original composition, several more papers, collections, and monographs have appeared that I haven't referenced here, but I've made no attempt to provide a comprehensive bibliography on the topic. I've read nothing since that I thought altered the fundamental points/argument; most simply further confirm it. I would add James Davidson's *Courtesans and Fishcakes* (1998) as a book worth looking into, as well, but didn't cite it directly above.