

*Biblical Family Values* (2009) for LLoL's *Good News Pack* at Armageddon:

## **Paul's views on mission, the mystery of marriage and homosexuality**

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This text introduces study "BFV 2009" by LLoL from 2009-09-19, as reviewed by Duncan.

The urgency of LLoL's Exodus call motivates releasing his 2009 text "as is" in 2025 without Duncan's few suggested revisions or any improvements LLoL saw since to strengthen its case. "*Pluck out your eye and hack off your hand to keep perfectionism from killing the body of work*", said Yas\Jesus\Isa. LLoL's core logic here stood a remarkable test of time, as none of his many attempts to get it refuted succeeded so far. Criticisms focussed on presentation ("looks") and citing more works ("hands"), but not on its "body". This "body" logic defines a stable core sexual ethics for integrating all truth from the two Great Witnesses, God's Words and God's Works. No more need to pick sides by getting caught up in the "sackcloths" that veil truth in either Witness. Thus, "conservative" and "progressive" followers of both can stop calling "fire from heaven" on perceived opponents "in the name of truth" at Armageddon (unless they actually wish to burn down God's paradise). It's tempting to see "the devil" in hidden\occult parts of truth. This study calls its bluff to cast out "the devil" from sexual ethics in the name of the real quest for the real answer on what sexuality is about – "in the name of Jesus" \RealQuestAnswer\Yas. Yet, as Yas warned, "the devil" is elusive, like the semantics of *nothing*. Thus, such a cultural exorcism will raise new questions in need of new Real Quests for Real Answers on the Exodus way to follow the One True Creator \God \Yah \Allah \Reality ("\" is used allover to define perfect synonyms).

Before the trainees of Yas were called "Christians" (implying arrival at a new identity), they were called "*those of the way*". This study is part of LLoL's return to this Exodus mentality. For too long have followers of Yas languished in their self-renewing Babylonian captivity chaos of **BABL** by **Blindly Assuming Blind Leveraging** that non-information about sex was "God's will". Such rebellion against Yah \Reality is the most dangerous form of witchcraft, as Samuel warned. If those who are supposed to be the light of the world curse themselves with dark magic in areas as central to human identity as sex, what chance does the rest of the world stand in trying to resist impending doom by accidental nuclear winter? This connection is not as far fetched as one might think: close scrutiny shows how correctly interpreting biblical family values is not the least of the many causes driving the Ukraine-Russia war and other culture wars among brothers in faith.

Meanwhile, Heaven's peace continues to reign in ZION of Earth – with a rainbow around Yah's Throne! May this 2009 study and other *Good News Pack* files help all People of God and People of Truth to find the mind-blowing peace of Reality to calm today's stormy sexual ethics. May humanity flee BABL for ZION in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exodus and finally find the road to sexual healing.

## Biblical Family Values for LLoL's Good News Pack at Armageddon 2025

*to help all People of God and all People of Truth to better navigate life in EDEN  
by digesting some meaty menus at the Wedding of the LAMB in ZION of Earth*

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#### 2025 Biblical Family Values Appendix for LLoL Discoveries after 2009

See other files in LLoL's Good News Pack MMv1, such as "LLoL's Ketubah for Yah & Yas",  
*Open Letter* OL7 to Yas and OL8 to Yah, as well as the "Craftiest Criminal" confession.  
These document substantial progress LLoL made in decoding the mystery bride of Christ.

## **Paul's views on mission, the mystery of marriage and homosexuality**

### **Abstract**

**The current most rigorous interpretation of the New Testament's position on homosexuality is a condemnation of the practice based on the writings of the Apostle Paul. Such a condemnation has drawn considerable criticism from a liberal school of thought due to the suffering it has caused among people with a homosexual orientation. In the present article it is shown that a more exacting analysis may well cast significant doubt on the often-assumed condemnation of homosexual behavior by Paul. While Paul most certainly did condemn homosexuality before his "Damaskus experience", there is no indication that he did afterwards. This is despite extensive contact with many people from a culture that considered male homoerotic relationships to be the highest form of love. Here it is suggested that translating the difficult Greek word "arsenokoitai" (αρσενοκοῖται 1Cor 6:9) as "rapists" is consistent with the literal meaning of the word and is backed by Paul's theology. Evidence is presented that Paul used the state-sponsored Cybele-Attis cult in Romans 1 as an easily recognizable example of the extraordinary depravity that can result from idolatry and from suppressing the truth by injustice. Thus Paul condemned homosexual behavior that is directly motivated by idolatry, but says nothing about homosexual behavior in general. The absence of clear statements cannot be explained by an alleged inability of Paul to find words unambiguous for today's readers, as Philo, a contemporary of Paul, condemned homosexuality in a way that leaves no room for doubt even after 20 centuries. It is concluded that Paul did not condemn homosexual relationships *per se*, but rather opposed the many sins that could corrupt any erotic relationship. Given**

**the strong sentiments of his fellow Jews and the deep care of Paul about them, it is easy to see why Paul would not commit anything to writing that could be misused to alienate Jews from the Gospel. In this context, the strongest statement that Paul could make in his letters in favor of supporting responsible homosexual relationships was to say nothing and not to join Judaism in a general condemnation. Finally, a list of the many sexual vices that Paul opposed is presented together with a short analysis of how Paul might handle current conflicts over homosexuality in the church.**

**If the conclusions presented here are correct, then there are considerable implications for the present polarized debate between conservatives who believe they have to condemn homosexual relationships, because Paul's texts apparently do this and liberals who support responsible homosexual relationships, because they understand Jesus' law of love to command this. The present study implies that there might be a third way, which reconciles important tensions between the other two without diluting Paul's texts and without requiring any higher criticism of the Bible. The key assumption of this third way is that Paul was a highly intelligent man who knew well the cultures that he wanted to evangelize. Based on this assumption and historic evidence this third way does not condemn homosexuality *per se*, but calls for responsibility in all erotic relationships. If this was indeed Paul's message, then traditional theology has overshot the mark by being overly restrictive at the expense of causing much distress to a minority over many centuries. Due to the considerable implications of these findings, a debate about the evidence presented here is particularly welcome.**

## 1. Introduction

Paul was undoubtedly a master missionary of the early church and his insight into the Christian faith of the first century is universally acknowledged. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century various authors have argued that some aspects of Paul's teaching are no longer relevant for today because they reflect the rather narrow morality of an ancient cultural context<sup>1</sup>. Here it is argued that there is no evidence of a narrow view of morality in Paul's writings: Paul's view of sexuality may well be more compatible with attitudes that are considered to be "responsible" and "ideal" in the contemporary western world than with those attitudes historically attributed to more traditional interpretations of his texts. The focus of this study is on the controversy surrounding homosexuality and related topics are only considered to the extent necessary for understanding Paul's likely views on homosexuality. It transpires that a number of substantial issues become important if we want to immerse ourselves enough into the world of Paul to understand what made him write those few verses<sup>2</sup> that are at the centre of so many debates today.

This article makes several key assumptions about Paul that are compatible with a "high view of Scripture"<sup>3</sup>. It is fairly safe to assume that Paul was extremely dedicated to the message of Jesus (up to the point of being willing to suffer repeated torture because of it) and lived in an

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<sup>1</sup> For examples see the review of viewpoint 5-6 in R. L. Holben (1999) "What Christians think about homosexuality – six representative viewpoints", BIBAL Press, North Richland Hills, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on Rom 1:24-27, 1Cor 6:9 and 1Tim 1:10.

<sup>3</sup> This means a view that lets the Bible speak for itself and that submits its hermeneutic to that, which is suggested by the text. It is characterized by a deep respect for the Scriptures and does not use any independent agenda to determine which parts of the Bible are considered important and which are no longer relevant for today. The main goal for believers who subscribe to such a view is to most closely hear what God wanted to say in the Bible, obviously assuming that God exists and inspired the Bible to help those who are interested in Him. See also [http://imitatiochristi.blogs.com/imitatio\\_christi/2006/06/a\\_high\\_view\\_of\\_.html](http://imitatiochristi.blogs.com/imitatio_christi/2006/06/a_high_view_of_.html) (accessed June 22, 2008).

age of intense controversies within Christianity<sup>4</sup>. Here it is also assumed that Paul was highly intelligent and well connected, not only with other Christians of his time (he must have known most of the material from our Gospels), but also with the secular culture of his day (he must have known much of the philosophy and common practices of his day rather well if he wanted to preach with enough impact for anybody to listen<sup>5</sup>). This assumption suggests rejecting conclusions which require the assumption that Paul contradicted himself in rather obvious ways<sup>6</sup> or that he did not know prominent aspects of the Greco-Roman culture that he evangelized or that he did not know relevant teachings of Jesus.

If the arguments presented here are valid, a third way is opened up that allows reconciling the currently hardened battlefronts between “conservatives” and “liberals” in discussions of the biblical position on homosexuality. The current debate has three basic assumptions at its core, where different sides give different weight to each assumption:

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Acts 10+15, Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and his letter to the Galatians.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Paul was intimately aware of the conflicting moralist and philosophical traditions of his day on marriage. His treatment of marriage in 1 Cor 7 cannot be fully appreciated without knowing the Stoic-Cynic debate about the advantages and disadvantages of marriage. Another example is Paul’s use of images and imagination in his letter to the Colossians that can only be described as a clever subversion from the point of view of the ancient Roman Empire.

For more details see Deming W (2004) “*Paul on marriage & celibacy: The Hellenistic background of 1 Corinthians 7*”, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Walsh, BC & Keesmaat SC (2004) “*Colossians remixed – subverting the empire*”, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.

<sup>6</sup> We assume that the nature of humans and the human capability to understand logic have not changed fundamentally in the last two millennia. We assume that only the cultures changed. We further assume that a dedicated effort by us today is capable of abstracting enough from our own culture and the ancient culture to decide whether a certain set of statements would have been recognized as “conflicting” by Paul in the first century. Such work requires extensive cross-cultural experience and understanding of the Gospel that Paul preached, as without both much of the key statements of Paul’s writings will remain incomprehensible.

- (i) Paul's writings are authoritative for the church because God inspired them.
- (ii) Paul's writings on homosexuality are easy to understand.
- (iii) Jesus' law of love commands that we do not place *unnecessary* burdens on people.

Conservatives usually weight (i) and (ii) over (iii), because they believe that humans do not have the right to criticize God's Word. On the other side, liberals usually weight (iii) over (i) and (ii), because they feel that love is more important than law. To resolve the conflict, many have looked for a new interpretation of Paul's texts on homosexuality, but results were less than satisfactory for conservatives that maintain a high view of scripture<sup>7</sup>. This is mainly because such interpretations either contradicted some of the existing evidence or because they involved higher criticism, which conservatives interpret as undermining the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. The results presented here do not require compromising assumption (i) and (iii) above, but they require rephrasing assumption (ii):

- (ii\*) To understand Paul's writings on homosexuality we need some basic information about the culture of the recipients of Paul's letters.

This study shows that such basic historic information and a close reading of various aspects of Paul's theology allow us to reach a straightforward interpretation of various difficult passages in Paul's writings. Essentially, it appears that Paul did not condemn homosexuality *per se*, although he had ample opportunity to do so in the Greek culture that he evangelized. Instead, he called for responsible behavior in all erotic relationships. If Jesus did not condemn homosexuality and Paul did not expect believers to automatically abstain from all homosexual relationships, then evangelical believers who try to follow their example might want to reconsider what it means in

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<sup>7</sup> For a review see Holben, L. R. (2001) "What Christians think about homosexuality. Six representative viewpoints.", BIBAL Press, North Richland Hills, Texas.

the 21<sup>st</sup> century to welcome into the Kingdom of God outsiders who have been alienated by large parts of society because of their different sexual orientation.

At this point a word about potential conflicts of interest of the author of this article may be helpful. This article was written by someone who has been living in the evangelical stream of Christianity for several decades by now, who continues to believe that “the Bible is Jesus Christ in written form” and who is a married heterosexual male. This study grew out of the desire to “examine the Scriptures every day to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11) and started as an exercise in rigorously justifying the conservative condemnation of all homosexual acts *per se*. Over time the author found himself running out of arguments to support the current conservative position directly out of the Bible. True to the tradition of the Reformation he was not happy to adopt the interpretations of previous centuries as authoritative in themselves. Simultaneously a new picture started to emerge that passed all the tests that the author could think of so far. This new picture is offered below for discussion. An overview is presented in section 4, followed by the supporting evidence in detail (sections 5-10). Finally the question is explored how Paul might have handled current conflicts about homosexuality in the church.

To allow for a more rigorous testing, the author decided to ask a wider audience for help with further examination. To facilitate the collection of feedback, he may set up a website that allows the submission of comments and the distribution of new evidence as it becomes available. From his own experience the author knows that it takes considerable time and effort to digest the material presented here, not because it is complicated, but because the topic is overshadowed by strong emotions and interpretations that have dominated for centuries. If the new approach presented here turns out to be wrong, then the author will do all he can to present the corresponding evidence and an improved approach at the website. However, at the moment the author cannot see any fundamental errors and thus invites debate about the material presented here. Ultimately everybody will have to follow their own conscience, while at the same time respecting others who are led to different conclusions by their conscience.

## 2. The classical interpretation of Paul on homosexuality

Traditionally only the following three texts have been cited when referring to Paul's position on homosexuality. Here they are reproduced in the NRSV along with their context [emphasis is mine]:

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and *they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images* resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

<sup>24</sup> *Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts* to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> *because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie* and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

<sup>26</sup> *For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,* <sup>27</sup> *and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*

<sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. <sup>29</sup> They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (Rom 1:18-32, NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? <sup>8</sup> But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that.

<sup>9</sup> Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, *male prostitutes, sodomites*, <sup>10</sup> thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Co 6:7-11, NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may *instruct certain people* not to teach any different doctrine, <sup>4</sup> and *not to occupy themselves with myths* and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. <sup>5</sup> But *the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith*. <sup>6</sup> Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, <sup>7</sup> desiring to be *teachers of the law*, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

<sup>8</sup> Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. <sup>9</sup> This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> fornicators, *sodomites*, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching <sup>11</sup> that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Ti 1:3-11, NRSV)

While the translation of Rom 1 is rather unambiguous, the meaning of the key words in the other two passages is not obvious (see discussion below). A simple comparison of translations demonstrates that translators had huge difficulties with translating these words<sup>8</sup>. Above, the Greek word behind “male prostitutes” is “malakoi” (“μαλακοί”), the word behind “sodomites” is “arsenokoitai” (“αρσενοκοίται”), but various words, including for example “effeminate”, “child molester” and “homosexual” have been used interchangeably. It is as if the only thing that translators can agree upon is that these words describe something sinful in the context of (male) sexuality. Traditionally Rom 1:26-27 has been used to understand what this great sin might be and a simple reading seems to point in the direction of homosexuality. As Scroggs (1983)<sup>9</sup> and

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<sup>8</sup> see p.338 in Boswell, J. (1980) “Christianity, social tolerance and homosexuality. Gay people in western Europe from the beginning of the Christian Era to the fourteenth century”, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois. . This book is from now on referred to as Boswell (1980) in the text.

<sup>9</sup> See pp. 106-109 in Scroggs, R. (1983) “The New Testament and homosexuality. Contextual background for contemporary debate.”, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, USA. This book is from now on referred to as Scroggs (1983) in the text.

Wright (1984, 1987) have argued<sup>10</sup>, a simple literal translation of “αρσενοκοίται” yields “those who have sex (κοίτ-) with males (αρσενο-)” and a literal translation of “μαλακοί” means “those who are soft”, which could be interpreted in various ways. Many of the early church fathers and early NT translations have understood Paul in this way and Wright (1984) gives an impressive list of occurrences of “αρσενοκοίτ-“ in the early church literature, building on the work of Boswell (1980)<sup>11</sup>. There is no doubt that within some centuries after Paul this became the official reading of the church and ever since these texts have served to warn about any form of homosexuality. This was not changed by the Reformation<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Wright, D. F. (1984) “Homosexuals or prostitutes? The meaning of αρσενοκοιται (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10)” *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 38 pp. 125-153. This article is from now on referred to as Wright (1984) in the text. - Wright, D. F. (1987) “Translating αρσενοκοιται (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10)” *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 41 pp. 396-398. - see also Petersen, W. L. (1986) “Can αρσενοκοιται be translated by ‘homosexuals’? (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10)” *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 40 pp. 187-191.

<sup>11</sup> p.335-353 in Boswell (1980), *ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> For modern examples, see the conservative viewpoints in Holben, L. R. (2001) “What Christians think about homosexuality. Six representative viewpoints.”, pp. 53-94+266, BIBAL Press, North Richland Hills, Texas. This book is from now on referred to as Holben (2001) in the text. - For Luther’s and Calvin’s position see Elwood, C (2005) “A singular example of the wrath of God: The use of Sodom in sixteenth century exegesis”, *Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 98, pp. 67-93.

Scroggs (1983) and Wright (1984) suggest that the origin of “αρσενοκοΐται” lies in a Hellenistic Jewish setting under marked Levitical inspiration. It is clear that many Hellenistic Jews unambiguously condemned the homosexuality they encountered in the Greek world. According to Wright<sup>13</sup> “αρσενοκοΐται came into use under the influence of the LXX of Leviticus to denote that homoerotic vice which Jewish writers like Philo, Josephus [...] regarded as a signal token of pagan Greek depravity.” This interpretation would place the Apostle Paul in this respect in the same school of thought along with Philo and many other contemporaries. Here it is argued that Paul – after his Damascus experience – no longer belongs to the same school of thought as Philo, when it comes to homosexuality. Before we take an in-depth look at the translation of “αρσενοκοΐται”, we need a short excursion into Paul’s work as a church planter with a long-term vision.

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<sup>13</sup> p. 145, Wright (1984), *ibid.*

### 3. Paul's missionary strategy

Paul describes an important cornerstone of his missionary strategy as follows:

<sup>31</sup> So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. <sup>32</sup> Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, <sup>33</sup> just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. <sup>11:1</sup> Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Co 10:31-11:1, NRSV)

Paul's priorities according to this text are clear: (i) glorify God by imitating Christ and (ii) avoid offending cultural sensibilities, wherever possible. This flexibility of Paul's approach to cultural matters is echoed many times in his writings (e.g. 1 Co 9:19-23, etc.). It was also evidently very important in his approach to the liberties of women. Paul was well aware of the extraordinary liberation of women that was part of the message of Jesus. This is reflected in Paul's theology of equality (Gal 3:28) and his church planting work where he frequently collaborated with women (e.g. see the greetings in Rom 16). However, when it came to missionary strategies, Paul's approach was more nuanced. Especially in his later letters, he advocated that women should stay within their socially acceptable roles of the time, to avoid discrediting the Word of God in a society that was not used to such freedom (e.g. Tit 2:5)<sup>14</sup>. Paul's teaching balanced such statements by something that could be regarded as an inherent "sell-by-date" for such instructions when he said that "husbands are to love their wives like Christ loved the church" (Eph 5:25; it should not take much to work out that in a largely Christian society men are to treat women with the same equality that characterized Jesus' way of treating women). Thus we see that Paul was willing to accommodate the Gospel to foreign social settings insofar as the truth permits in order

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<sup>14</sup> For the sake of this argument it does not matter, whether these later letters were actually written by Paul, as many conservatives assume or whether they were written by disciples that had immersed themselves deeply enough into Paul's teachings to propose this as a sensible strategy for a church that was coming under increasing pressure from persecution.

to make the core easier to understand for many people. In the case of his teachings about women, he lifted an enormous burden from those, who must have been wondering, whether they could continue their normal life within familiar patriarchic structures or whether their conversion *demand*ed that they *had* to confront these structures. Paul's message was simply that they could take the easy route and live within the given constraints of the society, trusting that the Gospel would eventually change the society if they individually followed the new message of love. Paul was, however, never willing to compromise the core of the Gospel, which becomes very clear in his letter to the Galatians:

*<sup>7</sup> not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ..... <sup>10</sup> Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ (Ga 1:7-10, NRSV)*

For Paul the core of the Gospel might be summed up as “the liberating salvation by grace to live a life of freedom for the advancement of God's Kingdom”, which was opposed to the “timid rule keeping in the hope of earning the favor of God” that he knew so well from Judaism (see Gal 1-6). In fact, Paul spent so much of his converted life fighting legalistic influences mainly from Judaism that it appears implausible that he would have resorted to them without a persuasive and direct argument. One cannot underestimate the importance of Paul's “Damascus experience” in determining his position on Judaism and Moses' law.

#### **4. Overview over a potential reconciliatory third way of reading Paul's texts on homosexuality.**

The current debate about homosexuality is dominated by two sides that shall be denoted by their positions as CAHA (Paul "Condemned-All-Homosexual-Acts") and NUH (Paul had "No-Understanderstanding-of-Homosexuality"). While there are individuals with their own agendas on both sides, many believers on both sides sincerely strive to do the will of God. Believers with CAHA positions at their best seek to honor God by guarding against what they perceive as the dilution of His Word, even where many acknowledge they hate the inescapable alienation and distress caused to many homosexuals. Believers with NUH positions at their best seek to love and accept all and not to place unnecessary burdens on people who should be able to come to Jesus as they are – but in doing so many will admit they are troubled by the existence of Paul's comments. Believers with CAHA positions would say to believers with NUH positions that it is undoubtedly a noble cause to love and accept all, but this cannot change facts: If *all* homosexual acts *per se* are indeed sins that separate from God and God chooses to reveal this by inspiring some authors of the Bible to commit this to writing, then no amount of love or sympathy will be able to change this. In this case one should be able to recover unequivocal evidence for the CAHA position from Paul's writings. However, if a substantial fraction of early Christians, including Paul, did not discriminate between a responsible use of homosexuality and a responsible use of heterosexuality, then *biblical* evidence should exist that does not fit well with CAHA expectations. In that case it should be possible to interpret biblical texts without great difficulty from a position that shall be denoted as "non-discriminatory" here. This article shows that it is indeed possible to interpret the key texts on homosexuality in the New Testament from such a

non-discriminatory perspective. Thus the evidence presented here is a potential example for the power of schools of thoughts that can twist the interpretation of well-intended texts for centuries without serious challenge, if the historic context of these texts is lost.

The present study did initially not seek to undermine CAHA interpretations, but rather in an attempt to rigorously demonstrate CAHA positions from Paul's writings it led to the new and surprising non-discriminatory interpretation that in the view of the author deserves further exploration. It may open a third way of interpreting Paul's texts on homosexuality, avoiding the failings of both NUH (sometimes accused of 'loose, modern day liberalism'; 'all heart') and CAHA (sometimes accused of 'strict, conservative fundamentalism'; 'all mind'), while recognizing the admirable positive qualities in both approaches. The non-discriminatory position presented here proposes a new and more natural way of translating, reading and interpreting those texts of Paul that have been used to argue that Paul saw homosexual relationships as inherently sinful. It is the current conviction of the author that this new understanding of Paul's texts is closer to Paul's own understanding than either corresponding CAHA or NUH interpretations. Before explaining the evidence in detail, here is a short overview.

- **Moses' law.** Paul knew this law inside out from his former life. However, after his Damascus experience he came to believe that followers of Jesus "are no longer under the law"<sup>15</sup> except under the one law of love<sup>16</sup>. This caused a careful reevaluation of Old Testament law. The result that the early church agreed upon in Acts 15 was that non-Jewish Christians are not bound by Moses' law. Paul trusted the Holy Spirit to help believers<sup>17</sup> fulfill the purpose of the law, which was to "love your neighbor as yourself"<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Acts 15; 1 Cor 9:20; Phil 3:5-8 and the whole letter to the Galatians among many other passages.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Gal 5:14; Rom 13:10 going back to teachings of Jesus like in Mark 12:28-34 and John 15:12.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Rom 8:14; 2 Cor 3:6 and Jesus' teaching in John 16:12-13.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Gal 5:14; Rom 13:10 going back to Jesus' teachings like in Mark 12:28-34.

To help in the process, Paul (like Jesus) invested considerable effort to flesh out the implications of the law of love and in the process reached some conclusions that one could have already reached from reading Moses. However, this was far from a mechanical reaffirmation of every rule written by Moses: some things were omitted<sup>19</sup> while other things were added<sup>20</sup> to help make the new law of love clearer. Thus the fact that Moses prohibited homosexual acts to keep Israel from the idolatry of its neighboring countries<sup>21</sup> does not *necessarily* carry over into Paul's teaching as a prohibition of all homosexual relationships, a conclusion that is confirmed by the apparent silence of Jesus on this topic. Given the clear words with which Paul distanced himself from popular Jewish teachings of his day, it is not enough to show that Jews condemned homosexuality for inferring that Paul did the same. Thus clear evidence from Paul's writings is needed if one wants to support the claim that Paul condemned homosexual relationships as inherently sinful. For two reasons we are in a good position to investigate this: First, Paul knew enough of ancient Greece that he must have encountered the ubiquitous homosexual ideals known from other ancient Greek authors. Secondly, Paul wrote quite extensively on sexual ethics so that we can expect clear words on homosexual behavior if he indeed considered this to be sinful in itself. In the absence of clear evidence of a sinful nature, Paul's message on this topic would have almost certainly been one of freedom to follow one's own

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<sup>19</sup> Moses taught that e.g. everybody who eats the fat of ox or sheep must be killed (Lev 7:23-25). This and many other laws of Moses were not transferred into the early church. Out of respect for Jewish believers Acts 15 upheld the law against eating blood (Lev 7:26-27; Lev 17:10) as a recommendation together with other things, including the recommendation to refrain from eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (and idolatry and 'harlotry' as discussed below). Paul's discussion of the topic in Rom 14 shows that there were differing views in the churches even on something as "obvious" as the meat. Needless to say that the new law of love precluded related death penalties.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Rom 12; Mt 5-7.

<sup>21</sup> Lev 18 + 20 firmly place the prohibition of homosexual acts in the context of warning against the idolatry of the neighboring nations of ancient Israel.

conscience while respecting that of others<sup>22</sup>. What follows is a discussion of Paul's writings touching on homosexuality from the non-discriminatory position.

- **Romans 1.** Historical texts make it very clear, that Rom 1 refers to a horrific cult that was as well known as detested by most 'normal' people in ancient Rome, yet officially supported by the state for reasons of 'national security'. This cult had many names but at its core were Cybele (the mother of all ancient gods) and her lover Attis, who castrated himself to please Cybele. Priests of this cult were expected to turn into intersex persons who castrated themselves and proved their point by committing homosexual acts.

In Rom 1 Paul is not making any deep statements about homosexuality in general. Instead he specifically refers to homosexual acts done by (certainly mostly) heterosexual people because of personally believing in an idolatrous religion of power. A careful analysis of the text and its historic context supports this view and thus prohibits us from making sweeping statements about Paul's beliefs on "everything homosexual", based on Rom 1.

- **"Malakoi"** (μαλακοί). A simple look into a modern dictionary shows that there is no need to greatly speculate about what Paul must have meant with this word in the context of a vice list. One of the many meanings listed is "morally weak, lacking self control"<sup>23</sup>. There is no hint in ancient Greek texts that "μαλακος" would denote anything specifically related to homosexuality, as other words existed for that purpose. Homosexuals could obviously also be "μαλακοί", but so could everybody else<sup>24</sup>. What Paul probably had in

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<sup>22</sup> Combine statements like in Gal 5:1 with Rom 14:10-12.

<sup>23</sup> see μαλακός, p. 1076-1077 in H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones & R. McKenzie (1996), A Greek-English Lexicon, with a revised supplement 1996", Clarendon Press, Oxford.

<sup>24</sup> see also Boswell (1980) *ibid.*, p. 340.

mind were people who had no moral spine and manipulated their way through life because they could not take “No” for an answer.

- **“Arsenokoitai”** (αρσενοκοίται). Again a simple look into a modern dictionary yields surprising results. “αρσενο-“ could not only denote anything “male-“, but also “masculine”, and “mighty”<sup>25</sup>, which is conceptually not far from the physical strength of typical, idealized males. While the former meaning would render “αρσενοκοίται” as “those who have sex with males”, the latter would read “those who use might to have sex”, in other words rapists. Here it is argued that the latter meaning is what Paul must have had in mind, as he carefully avoided any of the ubiquitous technical terms that denoted homosexual relationships in ancient Greek (e.g. “παιδεραστια”). Comparing Paul’s texts to the contemporary texts of Philo shows that it was certainly possible for authors of Paul’s time to condemn homosexual behavior in no uncertain terms. That Paul did not choose those clear words shows that he must have had something else in mind. It is argued that he is condemning forced sexual intercourse as supported by the second translation of “αρσενο-” above. Additional support for this translation comes from Paul’s own understanding of marriage that is well positioned to highlight the evil aspects of rape. The fact that there was no common clear word to denote people who forced sexual intercourse in ancient Greek (see below) seems to have motivated Paul to use a rare one or to invent one, as he is probably the first known Greek author to use the word “αρσενοκοίται”. The fact that no dedicated word existed for “rape” speaks volumes about

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<sup>25</sup> Liddell et al. (1996) *ibid.* p 248 see ἀρσίν.

the social norms in antiquity (or rather their absence in this respect). Against this setting Paul stands out as a reformer at the cutting edge of sexual autonomy<sup>26</sup>.

Thus it appears that Paul did not *per se* condemn the many homosexual relationships that he must have seen on his travels in Ancient Greece. He did, however, condemn various selfish and deceptive attitudes he perceived as being toxic to any loving relationship, whether heterosexual or homosexual, married or unmarried. What follows now is a more detailed discussion of the evidence that questions the traditional reading of Paul on homosexuality and lends further support to the new reading proposed above.

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<sup>26</sup> This image fits well with the observation that Paul is very carefully arguing that marriage is a personal decision, despite strong personal opinions on his side and contemporary state legislation by Augustus that required citizens to marry and have children under penalty of law. See p. 55 in W. Deming (2004) “Paul on marriage and celibacy”, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

## 5. Problems with the classical translations

A number of observations do not fit very well with the classical interpretation of Paul's texts.

- **Paul is the first known author to use the word “arsenokoitai”, a word that was not used in known anti-homosexual texts of his time.** If Paul intended to talk about homosexual acts he could have easily used several other Greek words that he must have known as they were in common use at that time<sup>27</sup>. In this case it makes no sense for Paul to use a word that nobody understands if he wanted to describe something so dangerous that it could prevent people from entering the Kingdom of God (which would defeat the whole purpose of Paul's missionary work). It is unlikely that someone as confrontational as Paul would choose an unknown word to timidly obscure the fact that he really meant what everybody around him called “paiderastia” or by several other words. Paul certainly was never slow to admonish those he believed to be wrong (see Gal 1:10; Gal 2:11; Acts 15:38-39) and it is unlikely there were political reasons to write in particularly obscure language about this topic (see the very open remarks of his contemporary Philo below). Traditional interpreters are yet to show a good reason why Paul did not use the common word “paiderastia” in any of his lists of vices or in Rom 1. Wright (1984) conveys the impression that Paul belonged to a tradition similar to the Hellenistic Judaism of Philo from Alexandria (died AD 50). If this were so, then one would expect similar vocabulary. However, Philo does not use any of the words that Paul uses, when he condemns both homosexuality and effeminacy. Texts from that time could be as unambiguous as this (Philo, Special Laws III, VII ,37 [emphasis is mine]):

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<sup>27</sup> See Boswell (1980), *ibid.* pp 345-349 and Wright (1984), *ibid.*

VII. (37) Moreover, *another evil, much greater than that which we have already mentioned, has made its way among and been let loose upon cities*, namely, the love of boys [παιδεραστεῖν = paiderastein], which formerly was accounted a great infamy even to be spoken of, but which sin is a subject of boasting not only to those who practise it, but even to those who suffer it, and who, being accustomed to bearing the affliction of being treated like women, waste away as to both their souls and bodies, not bearing about them a single spark of a manly character to be kindled into a flame, but *having even the hair of their heads conspicuously curled and adorned, and having their faces smeared with vermilion, and paint, and things of that kind, and having their eyes pencilled beneath, and having their skins anointed with fragrant perfumes (for in such persons as these a sweet smell is a most seductive quality), and being well appointed in everything that tends to beauty or elegance, are not ashamed to devote their constant study and endeavours to the task of changing their manly character into an effeminate one* [θήλειαν = theleian]. (38) And it is natural for those who obey the law to consider such persons worthy of death, since the law commands that the man-woman who adulterates the precious coinage of his nature shall die without redemption, not allowing him to live a single day, or even a single hour, as *he is a disgrace to himself, and to his family, and to his country, and to the whole race of mankind.*

(39) 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 vigour 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 labours night and day at cultivating that soil from which he never expects any produce at all.

(40) And I imagine that the cause of this is that among many nations there are actually rewards given for intemperance and effeminacy. At all events one may see *men-women continually strutting through the market place at midday, and leading the processions in festivals*; and, impious men as they are, having received by lot the charge of the temple, and beginning the sacred and initiating rites, and concerned even in the holy mysteries of Ceres.

(41) And some of these persons have even carried their admiration of these delicate pleasures of youth so far that they have *desired wholly to change their condition for that of women*, and have castrated themselves and have clothed themselves in purple robes, like those who, having been the cause of great blessings to their native land, walk about attended by body-guards, pushing down every one whom they meet.

(42) But if there was a general indignation against those who venture to do such things, such as was felt by our lawgiver, and *if such men were destroyed without any chance of escape as the common curse and pollution of their country, then many other*

*persons would be warned and corrected by their example.* For the punishments of those persons who have been already condemned cannot be averted by entreaty, and therefore cause no slight check to those persons who are ambitious of distinguishing themselves by the same pursuits.<sup>28</sup>

This text clearly demonstrates that authors of that time were free to express unambiguously that they believed homosexual acts to be evil along with every attitude that might go with them. This text is also a clear counter-example for those who claim that some prominent aspects of a “homosexual life style” could not have been known to or condemned by people at Paul’s time. On the contrary, the overlapping of stereotypes of Philo and of some authors in the 21st century is thought provoking.

If Paul would have wanted to condemn homosexuality because he really believed that this was indeed a “great evil let loose upon cities”, then it is certainly likely he would have used existing words to convey this. It is very probable that Paul knew Philo’s works or at least similar works from Hellenistic Judaism, as Paul must have been well aware of his opponents who tried to introduce Judaism and/or philosophy into the church<sup>29</sup>. To propose that Paul did not know the opinions and the vocabulary of Hellenistic Judaism or the extraordinary large extent of homosexual activity in Ancient Greece is equivalent to saying that Paul had extremely limited intelligence. However, if Paul knew all this, why did he not use the vocabulary that he and his audience would have known, if indeed he had wanted to communicate a message similar to that of Philo? The answer is most

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<sup>28</sup>Philo of Alexandria as cited by Yonge, C. D. (1996, c1993). *The works of Philo : Complete and unabridged* (597).

Peabody: Hendrickson.

<sup>29</sup> See Phil 3:2, Gal 6:12, Col 2:8, 1Tim 1:4; the fact that Paul does not quote what these people say is most probably due to his focus on what he thought to be good and true, see 1Thess 5:21, Rom 12:9.

probably very simple: Paul had a different message. He was concerned with spreading the Gospel rather than embroiling himself in debates of a political, cultural or sexual nature. If Paul had a different message from Philo, then it would be natural for him to try to find new words to express what he meant to say. Below evidence is presented for such an alternative and more compelling meaning.

- **Paul was no longer a Pharisee.** Given Paul's radical conversion from Judaism and law-keeping to Christianity, it seems very unlikely that Paul would have copied the legalistic outlook on life of Hellenistic Judaism without thorough reflection in the light of everything he knew about Jesus. For Paul there was only one law and that was the law of love (he must have known about the content of Mt 22:34-40). This law of love demanded to open up the Kingdom of God to as many people as possible. Thus Paul would have gone to some length to make sure that he would not place burdens on new converts that were not absolutely necessary (as an ex-Pharisee, Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees must have affected his teaching, see Mt 23:4 and Acts 15). Jewish moralists like Philo would not have had to worry about such problems, as they mostly stayed within their respective groups of like-minded people. Paul, on the other hand, wrote for a bigger and more diverse audience.
- **Male prostitutes.** It is well established that slaves comprised the majority of members in the newly founded churches of the first century. Secular sources of that time give a clear picture of what was frequently expected of slaves: many would have had to work as female or male prostitutes, sometimes under the most difficult circumstances

conceivable<sup>30</sup>. Many of these new Christians had no choice – if they wanted to remain alive. Thus Paul was very careful to follow Jesus (Mt 21:31) in avoiding any condemnation of prostitutes<sup>31</sup>, even when he explicitly talked about prostitution<sup>32</sup>. Thus, it would be inconsistent for Paul to condemn male slaves that were required to perform homosexual or other sexual acts for their masters. Therefore it is very unlikely that “αρσενοκοίται” translates as “male prostitutes” (see also Wright (1984) for a list of other reasons why Paul most probably did not mean male prostitutes). For the same reason any translation of “μαλακοί” as “male prostitute” or as the passive partner in a homosexual act is most likely to be wrong; it does not appear to be consistent with the Gospel that Paul preached if the access to the Kingdom of God is largely controlled by one’s social status that either allowed for sexual autonomy or didn’t<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> See Glancy, J.A. (1998) Obstacles to slaves’ participation in the Corinthian church. *J Bibl Lit* 117(3)481-501.

Glancy, J. A. (2006) *Slavery in early christianity*. Fortress Press.

<sup>31</sup> πόρναι = prostitutes, grammatically the female plural

<sup>32</sup> 1Cor 6; Paul warns against πορνεία “porneia” = “fornication” or “sexual immorality” which in the figurative sense also meant “idolatry”. Paul also warns against being πόρνοι, which in the NT denotes “a man who has sexual intercourse with a prostitute” or a “fornicator” or a “sexually immoral person” (Friberg, T., Friberg, B., & Miller, N. F. 2000. Analytical lexicon of the Greek New Testament. Baker's Greek New Testament library. Vol. 4 (324). Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan). While πόρνος as the male form of πόρνη could also denote a male prostitute (mainly in texts before the NT), scholars agree that in the NT it is used to describe the (certainly mainly male) clients driving the prostitution business that degraded it’s workers to sex-objects. Such degradation was certainly incompatible with the message of Jesus that sought to restore the dignity of every human being.

<sup>33</sup> A slave who tried as good as he could to follow Jesus and submit to his earthly master “as to the Lord” (see Eph 6:7) would be thrown into a life-threatening conflict of conscience at any time by his master who could turn him into a passive partner in an homosexual act, if indeed “μαλακος” would denote this. It is much more probable that the early slaves, who followed Jesus and still had to work as male or female prostitutes felt much comfort from Jesus’ statement that they could enter the Kingdom of God before many religious dignitaries (Mt 21:31).

- Paul did not condemn people for external reasons.** Others have suggested translating “μαλακοί” as “effeminate” (KJV, NASB) and some church fathers have apparently used it to denote “masturbators”<sup>34</sup>. Neither makes sense in the context of the message that Paul was preaching. Translating “effeminate” excludes some of the weakest and most vulnerable people of society (that others often pick on) from the Kingdom of God, which is clearly incompatible with Jesus’ message of freedom for those who have been marginalized (Lk 4:18). Also Philo and other ancient authors do not use the word “μαλακοί” when complaining about effeminacy<sup>35</sup> and the male-idolizing culture of ancient Greece would more easily accuse a man of effeminacy who helps a woman do her work than a man who was erotically attracted to other men<sup>36</sup>.

Translating “masturbators” opens many other problems, which again do not fit well with the message that Paul was preaching: (i) Why would Paul believe that the Creator criminalizes almost all men and many women for something that is usually a natural part of growing up and learning about one’s body, something that is very easy, pleasant and (within measure) free from negative effects on other people? This fits more a ‘god’ who enjoys the suffering of others, than the loving father that Paul preached<sup>37</sup>. (ii) How should this be handled practically? Will a ‘wet dream’ already exclude one from the Kingdom of God? Surely if something is so important (“not enter the Kingdom of God”) and a temptation as frequent as this, one wonders, why no NT author provides more details or even mentions this again.

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<sup>34</sup> See Boswell (1980), *ibid.*, p339+364, e.g. John the Faster.

<sup>35</sup> Philo uses θήλειαν, which expresses the female character much more directly.

<sup>36</sup> See Boswell (1980), *ibid.*, p 340.

<sup>37</sup> See Eph 1:3-6; Eph 3:14-21. See also 1Cor 3:21-23.

- **Church fathers.** Many writings of church fathers only quote Paul directly and thus do not help much in translating “αρσενοκοίται”. As Wright (1984) and Boswell (1980) point out, some church fathers’ use of the word is compatible with a similar meaning as the current traditional one. This is not surprising, as these authors were often several centuries away from Paul’s world and might have used the same texts from Leviticus that have been used recently to interpret “αρσενοκοίται”. In the absence of any need for further scholarly debate about the topic such a simple analysis must have seemed sufficient at that time. However, Boswell (1980) points out that some observations do not fit this general picture and concludes that there is “no reason to believe that either “αρσενοκοίται” or “μαλακοί” connoted homosexuality in the time of Paul or for a few centuries thereafter”<sup>38</sup>. Here are some observations:

**Chrysostomus**, Patriarch of Constantinople (AD 347-407), wrote extensively about homosexuality, which he considered to be “the worst of all sins”<sup>39</sup>. He had extensive opportunities to link “αρσενοκοίται” to homosexual behavior in his many treatments of this topic, but did not do so<sup>40</sup>. While Boswell (1980) believes this to indicate that “αρσενοκοίται” did not mean “homosexuals” for Chrysostomus, Wright (1984, p.144) suggests that it still could have meant this and that Chrysostomus intended to make his writings easier to understand by using more widely known words. Both, Wright (1984) and Boswell (1980) agree that Chrysostomus rarely used the term “αρσενοκοίται” and other Greek authors of any age are no different – if they used the term at all.

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<sup>38</sup> See Boswell (1980), *ibid.*, p 353.

<sup>39</sup> Boswell (1980), *ibid.* p.348

<sup>40</sup> Boswell (1980), *ibid.*, p. 347-348.

**John the Faster**, Patriarch of Constantinople (Joannes Jejunator, died AD 595) instructs priests to ask penitents about their sexual activity. He states that “*Nevertheless also many even achieve the defilement of arsenokoitias (αρσενοκοΐτιας) with<sup>41</sup> their own wives.*”<sup>42</sup>. Some have interpreted this as supporting evidence for the meaning “anal intercourse”, while others have suggested “homosexual acts in the presence of their wives”, but these translations are not without challenges<sup>43</sup>. Thus the tradition of the Greek speaking Eastern Church in Constantinople that clearly condemned homosexuality provides us with remarkable anomalies, which strongly question the claim that “αρσενοκοΐται” was universally understood to mean “homosexual”.

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<sup>41</sup> μετά prep. with: (1) gen. with, in company with, among; by, in; on the side of; against; (2) acc. after, behind (μετά τό with inf. after) (see Newman 1993, *ibid.*)

<sup>42</sup> see Wright 1984, p. 139-140 and Boswell 1980 p. 364, both citing John the Faster, Poenitentiale from J.P. Migne (1857-1891), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, vol 88 (Paris, Garnier, pp. 1896-1893).

<sup>43</sup> Clearly, one cannot have homosexual relations with one’s wife and husbands are certainly not regarded as male prostitutes for their wives here; thus John the Faster’s use of the word contradicts Wright’s (1984) and Boswell’s (1980) preferred translations of “αρσενοκοΐται”, respectively. For this particular instance, Boswell suggests translating “αρσενοκοΐτιας” as “anal intercourse”, but this obliterates the meaning of “αρσενο”. Wright (1984) and some ancient Latin translators (see Boswell 1980, p.364) “solved” this problem by interpreting “meta” as being with the “genitive of the companion” in order to translate “αρσενοκοΐται” as homosexuals. This would render the passage: “...many men engage in homosexual activity in the company of their own wives” and would assume that such threesomes in bed were a common phenomenon at that time (πόλλοι = “many” is undeniably part of the Greek text). This is hardly true for ‘sexually liberated’ marriages today and appears even more doubtful for the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

The above reasons combine to create difficulties in the translation of “αρσενοκοίται” as either “homosexuals” or “active partners in homosexual acts” or “male prostitutes” or “people who engage in anal intercourse”. It has also been suggested to translate “αρσενοκοίται” as “homosexual slave traders”<sup>44</sup> and occasionally as “homosexual rapists”<sup>45</sup>. These translations suggest a new aspect, namely the use of force to make the corresponding sexual acts happen. It is argued below that this use of force was the core of the evil that Paul condemned and that he would not have restricted this condemnation to homosexual acts. Rape uses the equivalent of the strength of a man to get sex, hence Paul’s use of “αρσενο-”. Thus “rapist” is most probably what Paul had in mind when he coined (or selected) the term. Such rape can be homosexual or heterosexual, it can be committed by slave traders that use this to enslave people by breaking their personalities and it can be committed by husbands against their wives. Sensitivity towards rape as something evil was not well developed in the ancient world as can be seen from the fact

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<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.jeramy.org/gay/arsenok.htm> and Martin, Dale. *Arsenokoites and malakos: Meanings and Consequences*. Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality, Robert Brawley. Westminster Press: Louisville, 1996.

<sup>45</sup> See <http://www.jeramy.org/gay/arsenok.htm>

that all words that describe rape are much broader and could all be applied in other contexts too<sup>46</sup>. Hence the need for Paul to coin a new term (or to select one that is so obscure that it was practically not used in the Greek literature that we know<sup>47</sup>). The lack of a word for “rape” in ancient Greek indicates the monumental task that Paul was facing in explaining the evil of forced sexual intercourse. While translating “αρσενοκοίται” as “rapists” is much more in line with a responsible 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of sexuality, it raises the question, as to whether there is something in Paul’s theology that supports this. Here we have to turn to what Paul calls the ‘mystery of marriage’, but before we can do that, we have to revisit Paul’s condemnation of homosexual acts in Romans 1.

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<sup>46</sup> There were several words that could be used to describe rape among other things, but their meaning was so general that it would not have been obvious without further context that Paul meant forced sexual intercourse specifically.

These general words are:

άρπαγή (seizure robbery, forcible abduction, rape, thing seized, booty, prey, greediness, ...;

ἄρπαγες is listed in the same vice list, where ἀρσενοκοίται is given, which indicates that Paul certainly wanted to be more specific than just using such a general word),

άρπαγμός (robbery, rape) and similar words in the ἀρπάζω group,

ἀπαγωγή (leading away, dragging away, rape, separation, withdrawal, ...),

βιά (bodily strength, act of violence, ... rape), βίασμός (violence, rape), and everything related to βιάζω

μάρπτις (seizer, ravisher),

φθορά (destruction, ruin, deterioration, ... rape),

ὑβρις (wanton violence arising from the pride of strength or from passion, insolence, ..., lust, lewdness, violation, rape, ...),

αἰσχύνω (shame, make ugly, tarnish, dishonor (especially a woman), ...) and other words from that root,

μολύνω (stain, defile, debauch; used in Zech 14:2),

ταπεινῶω (lower, reduce, humble, abase, make lowly, ... violate a woman, see p.1757 in Liddell et al. and e.g. Gen 34:2, 2Ki 13:12+14, Ez 22:10-11 but also Matt 23:12, Gen 16:9, 1Pet 5:6. This word is used several times in the OT to denote rape (2Sam 13:12+22+32, Lam 5:11), but its wide range of meanings could also easily be misunderstood as “any loss of honor” if Paul wanted to use this word to denote “rape” specifically in a vice list).

The description of the rape in Gibea in the LXX (Jud 19:25 + 20:5) states that the men

ἐγνῶσαν (‘know’, based on a frequent Hebrew OT word for sexual intercourse),

ἐνέπειξαν (‘play in/into/inside’, where παίζω includes a very wide range of plays, sports, hunts and also what Isaac did, when he played with his wife in Gen 26:8, so hardly specific to rape) and

ἐταπεινῶσαν (lower, reduce, humble, abase, make lowly, ... violate) the woman. This provides an insight into the trouble that ancient writers sometimes had if they wanted to unequivocally talk about forced sexual intercourse.

See Liddell et al. (1996) *ibid.* for sources for this collection of words.

<sup>47</sup> There is also the possibility that Paul used a very obscure word that existed at his time but never survived in any of the manuscripts we have today, with the possible exception of the Sybilline Oracles (2.71-73) as discussed by Wright (1984), *ibid.*. In any case this indicates that public conscience in this respect was not well developed.

## 6. Homosexuality and Idolatry in Romans 1

Scholars in recent times have struggled to interpret Rom 1:18-32 due to a variety of reasons<sup>48</sup>.

The traditional reading mostly interprets the statements given there as a sequence of events that happen on a grand cultural level, presumably over a number of generations:

- (i) a culture suppresses the truth by injustice,
- (ii) society no longer recognizes the true God,
- (iii) idols are put in God's place,
- (iv) people feel really clever in their rebellion against God,
- (v) God calls them to turn back and patiently waits like with the nations of Canaan (Gen 15:16),
- (vi) eventually God has to act to prevent the evil from becoming even bigger as such a society crosses the point of no return (Deut 9:4-5),
- (vii) now God lets them run into more delusions without restraining them
- (viii) this results in homosexuality,
- (ix) which leads to a "due penalty", which homosexuals experience in their own bodies before
- (x) God wipes such a society from the face of the earth like he did in Ancient Canaan and with the Roman Empire.

Such an interpretation often fuels fear about a demise of the reader's civilization by translating into predictions of doom and gloom any unsettling observations (or rumors) of people who express their sexuality differently from some accepted "norm". People who promote such views

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<sup>48</sup> See Scroggs (1983) *ibid.*, Holben (2001) *ibid.* and R. B. Ward (1997) "Why unnatural? The tradition behind Romans 1:26-27", *Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 90, pp. 263-284.

often ignore the multitude of other factors that were probably enough in themselves to destroy these cultures (e.g. idolatry and bankruptcy among others). Here we shall attempt to read Rom 1 with the eyes of Paul and as much exegetical rigor as possible. If this is done, several observations do not fit well with the suggestion that Paul is talking about societies; instead, it seems to be much more likely that he talks about the tragic decisions of some individuals and their consequences. The problems include the following:

- Paul only talks about those people who suppress the truth by injustice (v18).
- These people know enough about the truth so that they cannot be excused by ignorance. They understand something about making just decisions and worshipping the true God (v20).
- Then a sequence of things happens to *these* persons: They do stupid things > substitute the glory of God for something silly > God gives them over to their lusts > they do shameful homosexual acts > they receive a “due penalty” in their *own* body.
- Paul stresses again that this sequence only applies to those who swap the worship and truth of God for something that has been made up (i.e. a creature; v25).
- In the context before and after (Rom 1:17; Rom 2:1) Paul is talking about the individual’s relationship to God and how we individually can be set right with God by individually believing. The most natural reading for Rom 1 will thus also use an individual’s perspective.
- Paul stressed that these people received “themselves the due penalty for their error”, again stressing their individual responsibility. Paul was certainly aware of the implications of Ez 18:3, which meant he must have carefully avoided any language that implied that the children pay for the sins of their fathers.

- Paul makes it very clear that the homosexual acts he talks about happen as a consequence of (personally) choosing to believe a pagan religion that substitutes God's eternal power by various creatures.

Thus a rigorous reading of Rom 1 makes it difficult to maintain that Paul was talking about the way whole societies change. Instead Paul appears to talk about some individuals who engaged in idolatry and as a direct consequence committed deeds, which were shocking to the contemporary Roman and Greek community.

Is there any further evidence that this link of homosexual acts to idolatry was indeed *the* particularly bad thing that Paul had in mind? To decide this, it will be important to first dive into the ancient culture that Paul lived in and then read his texts on that background<sup>49</sup>. The Old Testament documents a long history of association between idolatry and immoral sexual behavior and Paul was certainly aware of this. Moses' prohibitions of various specific sexual behaviors were in the context of warning Israel, not to follow the gods of its neighbors (Lev 18+20, etc.). Paul also must have been acutely aware of the diversity of cults in the Roman Empire of his day<sup>50</sup>. He must have known the **Phrygian cult of Cybele and Attis**, which was officially imported by the Roman Senate in 204 B.C. during the crisis posed by Hannibal<sup>51</sup>. The subsequent victory of Rome did much to increase its credibility and later emperors like Augustus and Claudius promoted this cult even further as part of the official religion. The Cybele temple was right at the heart of Rome's political power center on the Palatine Hill and Cybele was called many names, which included "the great mother", "mother of the gods" and "mother earth".

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<sup>49</sup> This important exegetical principle does not stop to unearth surprises. E.g. see R. B. Ward (1992) "Women in Roman baths", Harvard Theological Review Vol. 85, pp. 125-147.

<sup>50</sup> Ferguson, E (1987) "Backgrounds of early Christianity", Erdmanns Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>51</sup> Ferguson (1987), *ibid.* p.225

Despite official support for the cult in Paul's society it is surprisingly unknown today. The surprise is reduced when the highest form of worship to the goddess is considered. Men who were really dedicated and wanted to become priests were voluntarily emasculated, offered their genitalia to the goddess and tried to live as intersex persons in all aspects of their life. Such behavior, shocking to Romans and Greeks, was justified with the emasculation of Attis in the purported history of the deity<sup>52</sup> and may originally have been associated with fertility magic. Galli (as the priests were called), tried to get rid of their original gender in many ways<sup>53</sup> and the orgiastic celebrations of this cult involved considerable homosexual activity. There is a wide literature on this "magna mater" cult, but here the focus shall be on quotes from Christian authors from that era to help convey how Paul might have thought about this. Please note in the following descriptions, how closely the idolatrous beliefs influenced the actual deeds of Cybele-Attis priests [emphasis is mine]:

Cybele of Dindymus—I am ashamed to speak of it—who could not entice her adulterous lover, who unhappily was pleasing to her, to lewdness, because she herself, as being the mother of many gods, was ugly and old, mutilated him, doubtless that she might make a god of the eunuch. *On account of this story, the Galli also worship her by the punishment of their emasculated body. Now certainly these things are not sacred rites, but tortures.* (Minucius Felicius (around AD210), 'The Octavius of Minucius Felix', Chapter XXI, Early Church Fathers ECF 1.4.2.1.0.21) <sup>54</sup>

The mother of the gods herself, while she lived in Phrygia after the banishment and death of her husband, though a widow, and aged, was enamoured of a beautiful youth; and because he was not faithful, *she mutilated, and rendered him effeminate: on which*

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<sup>52</sup> Ferguson, *ibid.* p.225-227

<sup>53</sup> Townsley, J (2000), "Romans 1:18-32: Paul, the Goddess religions and homosexuality"

<http://www.jeramy.org/papers/paulcybl.html> (accessed February 3, 2008).

<sup>54</sup>Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325.* Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second. (185).

*account even now she delights in the Galli as her priests.* (Lactantius (ca. AD 240-320), ‘The Epitome of the Divine Institutes’, Chapter VIII, Early Church Fathers ECF 1.7.1.2.0.9)<sup>55</sup>

In their very temples one may see scandalous performances, accompanied by the moaning of the throng: *men letting themselves be handled as women* and flaunting with boastful ostentatiousness this ignominy of their impure and unchaste bodies. They parade their misdeeds in the public eye ... Next, being *divorced from their masculinity, they get intoxicated* with the music of flutes and invoke their goddess to fill them with an unholy spirit so that they can ostensibly *predict the future to fools*. What sort of monstrous and unnatural thing is all this? *They say they are not men and indeed they aren't; they want to pass as women.* (Firmicus, 4<sup>th</sup> century, “The error of pagan religions”, 4.2, as cited by [www.jeramy.org/papers/paulcybl.html](http://www.jeramy.org/papers/paulcybl.html) ).

While Christian writers may not be the best source for studying the intricate details of the Cybele-Attis cult, they do provide the view of contemporary outsiders and are certainly a good way of ascertaining some thoughts that Paul probably had on this as well.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is widely acknowledged as a very systematic work. Starting with the depravity of mankind, Paul slowly works his way through the history of salvation in order to explain the glory of the Gospel. An excellent start for a work with such a structure is to find a universally agreed worst possible contemporary example of how low man could fall and then start from there. Today’s equivalent might be the Nazi death camps. Could it be that the Cybele-Attis cult was a sensible choice for such an example in the 1<sup>st</sup> century patriarchic society of Rome that valued male virility? Augustine (AD 354-430) lived close enough to this cult to shed some light on this question. He describes the horror of this cult extensively in “The city of God”, book VII, chapters 24-26. The following are excerpts from chapter 26 [emphasis is mine]:

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<sup>55</sup>Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. VII : Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily and Liturgies. (227).

Concerning the Abomination of the Sacred Rites of the Great Mother.

Concerning the effeminates consecrated to the same Great Mother, in *defiance of all the modesty which belongs to men and women*, Varro has not wished to say anything, nor do I remember to have read anywhere aught concerning them. *These effeminates, no later than yesterday, were going through the streets and places of Carthage with anointed hair, whitened faces, relaxed bodies, and feminine gait*, exacting from the people the means of maintaining their ignominious lives. Nothing has been said concerning them. Interpretation failed, reason blushed, speech was silent. *The Great Mother has surpassed all her sons, not in greatness of deity, but of crime*. To this monster not even the monstrosity of Janus is to be compared. His deformity was only in his image; hers was the deformity of cruelty in her sacred rites. He has a redundancy of members in stone images; she inflicts the loss of members on men. This abomination is not surpassed by the licentious deeds of Jupiter, so many and so great. He, with all his seductions of women, only disgraced heaven with one Ganymede; she, with so many avowed and public effeminates, has both defiled the earth and outraged heaven. .... This Great Mother of the gods, however, has brought mutilated men into Roman temples, and has *preserved that cruel custom, being believed to promote the strength of the Romans by emasculating their men*. Compared with this evil, what are the thefts of Mercury, the wantonness of Venus, and the base and flagitious deeds of the rest of them, which we might bring forward from books, were it not that they are daily sung and danced in the theatres? But what are these things to so great an evil,—an evil whose magnitude was only proportioned to the greatness of the Great Mother,—especially as these are said to have been invented by the poets? as if the poets had also invented this that they are acceptable to the gods. Let it be imputed, then, to the audacity and impudence of the poets that these things have been sung and written of. But that they have been incorporated into the body of divine rites and honors, the deities themselves demanding and extorting that incorporation, what is that but the crime of the gods? Nay more, the confession of demons and the deception of wretched men? *But as to this that the Great Mother is considered to be worshipped in the appropriate form when she is worshipped by the consecration of mutilated men, this is not an invention of the poets, nay, they have rather shrunk from it with horror than sung of it.* <sup>56</sup>

While Firmicus states that predicting the future was one of the appeals of the cult, Augustinus adds another motivation: a thirst for power. This must have been particularly strong in the political epicentre of the superpower of the day. Augustinus also provides a credible explanation for the lack of publicity of Cybele among classical scholars of today: The extraordinary brutality of this cult did not inspire any poets to write about it, as people in ancient times rather preferred the soap-opera like adventures of the various gods that were all the sons of “the great mother”.

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<sup>56</sup>Schaff, P. (1997). *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. II*. St. Augustin's City of God and Christian Doctrine. (136).

This evidence establishes that the Cybele-Attis cult could indeed have been what Paul had in mind when writing Romans 1. It strongly suggests<sup>57</sup> that Paul used the Cybele-Attis cult as an example for how low people can fall, if they decide to use injustice to keep down the truth (something that must have happened frequently in the Roman Empire). Paul condemns believing in idols and as a particularly shocking example he demonstrates the power and danger of such belief systems that can even make (certainly mostly) heterosexual men want to turn themselves into homosexuals – against their own natural heterosexual impulses<sup>58</sup> and even if it means that they have to mutilate themselves. The scale of the official Cybele-Attis cult in Rome only underlined his point about the extent of human depravity. Two questions remain.

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<sup>57</sup> See also Townsley, J (2000), “Romans 1:18-32: Paul, the Goddess religions and homosexuality” <http://www.jeramyt.org/papers/paulcybl.html> (accessed February 3, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> This reading of “against nature” as an “against one’s individual nature” is most appropriate in a context that speaks of the moral responsibility of individuals, their knowledge of God, their decision to serve or not to serve him. It is hardly credible to claim that Paul would have referred to contemporary biology textbooks or other writings or the majority opinion or a council of “wise men” or any other human construct to determine what “natural” means. From his experience with Phariseism as a way of life he certainly knew that all these approaches would be based on “the letter that kills” (2 Cor 3:6), as they can never describe the complex reality without crushing some people that don’t fit the pattern. If any of the numbers about new converts in Acts are to be believed, then Paul must have known at least some genuinely homosexual partnerships, as these were not uncommon at the time (see Boswell, 1980, *ibid.* p. 82-84) and most probably came into the church as well. To maintain that Paul did not know these things would again be equivalent to accusing him of lacking ordinary intelligence and/or to accusing Luke of grossly exaggerating his crowd estimates by about three orders of magnitude. This would make Christianity something that did not “turn the world upside down” and is compatible with “a dim-witted Paul preaching to some sleepy back-yard churches and writing some well-intended but ill-informed letters”. Hardly a credible depiction of the Paul who wrote in the New Testament.

1. **Why did Paul not name names?** Paul was certainly more interested in unmasking general patterns of how idolatry works than in pinpointing particular idols, especially since such idols frequently changed their name from country to country. Avoiding names also avoided unnecessary extra persecution for his readers. Thus he attempted to be as general as possible, but without condemning acts that he considered unproblematic<sup>59</sup>. History proves his point, as similar cults have arisen repeatedly. Thus the Cybele-Attis cult is not alone in its attempt to annihilate the physical differences between men and women by turning them into an intermediate sex, which frequently goes hand in hand with homosexual behavior<sup>60</sup>.
2. **Did any early authors recognize Cybele-Attis in Rom 1?** It is an important test for any interpretation of Rom 1, how people who lived shortly after Paul saw the text. Interestingly, we do have such a witness, even if only in the form of a warning against a gnostic heresy that tried to justify its peculiar mix of the Cybele-Attis cult and Christianity by misquoting Rom 1, presumably to demonstrate that “Cybele-Attis is in the

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<sup>59</sup> Note that in Rom 1 Paul is talking only about idol worshippers that turn to homosexual behavior. He does not talk about *all* homosexual behavior and for example does not mention “paiderastein” or any other Greek word that would include homosexual behavior in his list of vices in Rom 1:29-31. It is a manifold insult to compare a committed loving homosexual relationship of today with the cruelties that were common in the power-obsessed Cybele-Attis cult in Ancient Rome.

<sup>60</sup> This is true of some forms of shamanism that sometimes believe the superstition that the more unpleasant and cruel an act is, the more power it will have. Unfortunately, the same superstition exists in some of the political power centres of today, where some politicians would stop at nothing to increase their power, not even at voodoo rituals that involve homosexual acts by otherwise heterosexual people. It is needless to say that these acts are hugely shameful and thus carefully guarded secrets by those who do this (2007, personal communication by a source that requested anonymity but reliably knows at least one country where this is a problem).

Bible”. Hippolytus defended the Christian faith against the gnostic influences of these “Naassenes”. Towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Hippolytus wrote [emphasis is mine]:

For (the Naassene) says, there is *the hermaphrodite man*. According to this account of theirs, the intercourse of woman with man is demonstrated, in conformity with such teaching, to be an exceedingly wicked and filthy (practice). For, says (the Naassene), *Attis has been emasculated, that is, he has passed over from the earthly parts of the nether world to the everlasting substance above, where, he says, there is neither female or male, but a new creature, a new man, which is hermaphrodite*. As to where, however, they use the expression “above,” I shall show when I come to the proper place (for treating this subject). But they assert that, by their account, they testify that Rhea [the mother of the gods] is not absolutely isolated, but—for so I may say—the universal creature; and this they declare to be what is affirmed by the Word. “For the invisible things of Him are seen from the creation of the world, being understood by the things that are made by Him, even His eternal power and Godhead, for the purpose of leaving them without excuse. Wherefore, knowing God, they glorified Him not as God, nor gave Him thanks; but their foolish heart was rendered vain. *For, professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into images of the likeness of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore also God gave them up unto vile affections; for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.*” What, however, the natural use is, according to them, we shall afterwards declare. “And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly”—now the expression that which is unseemly signifies, according to these (Naasseni), the first and blessed substance, figureless, the cause of all figures to those things that are moulded into shapes,—“and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.” *For in these words which Paul has spoken they say the entire secret of theirs, and a hidden mystery of blessed pleasure, are comprised.*<sup>61</sup>

Here Hippolytus explains how the Naassenes twisted Rom 1 to their own ends. What Paul condemned in Rom 1, the Naassenes saw as a blessing that brought them closer to God by approximating heaven where there is neither male nor female. To achieve this ideal they looked to the Cybele-Attis cult that was much older than Paul’s writings, but

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<sup>61</sup>Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. V: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Appendix. (49).

they tried to use Paul's writings to gain a foothold in Christian circles<sup>62</sup>. The Naassenes enthusiasm to 'discover Cybele-Attis in the Bible' must have blinded them to the fact that the context makes clear that Paul was opposed so this. This makes it undeniably clear that even about 15 decades after Paul, people could recognize the Cybele-Attis cult in Rom 1.

To summarize, in Rom 1 Paul was only talking about homosexual acts that were done by (certainly mostly) heterosexual individuals out of personal voluntary devotion to obvious idols. Paul's main point is that individuals who suppress the truth by unrighteousness are in great danger, as this leads to idolatry that can trap one into doing things that everybody would normally consider shameful and that can go as far as performing homosexual acts against one's own (in most cases) heterosexual nature. God's wrath is simply that God will allow such people to harm themselves that way if that is what they really want (castration was a dangerous medical procedure in those days and there were certainly enough sexually transmitted diseases to make promiscuity dangerous). Paul expresses a similar thought in 2 Th 2:11-12, where he says that God will allow persons to construct ever more elaborate illusions if they believe lies. This is a sobering thought, when applied to the question what Paul really believed about homosexuality.

What then does Rom 1 mean for translating "ἀρσενοκοίται"? Surprisingly little. The reasons given above are inconsistent with the current conservative interpretation of Rom 1, as Paul appears to address a very special group of people who mostly acted against their own sexual orientation motivated by obvious idolatry. Thus Rom 1 does not address the question of homosexuality in general and we have to look elsewhere for help in understanding "ἀρσενοκοίται". Help appears from a completely unexpected place.

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<sup>62</sup> Twisting statements in Paul's letter's apparently has a long tradition, see 2 Pet 3:16.

## 7. The mystery of marriage

Paul writes to the Ephesians about something that he clearly must have thought much about:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”<sup>32</sup> This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:31-32, NRSV)

It is safe to assume that types and symbols were very important to Paul, who was no stranger to the symbols of the prophets in the Old Testament. He certainly was familiar with the prophets who frequently compared Israel’s relationship with God to that of an adulterous wife with her husband (e.g. Ez 16). This probably inspired him to think of Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride. If the relationship between man and woman was a symbolic type of the relationship between believers and Jesus, then believing in Jesus should also have consequences for the way males and females interact. That Paul thought along these lines can be seen in this statement [emphasis is mine]:

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,*  
<sup>26</sup> in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,<sup>27</sup> so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.<sup>28</sup> *In the same way,* husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (Eph 5:25-28, NRSV)

This is not the place to deal with the abounding patriarchic interpretations that have centered on the verses before (submission of wives). We will rather raise the question as to what aspects of Jesus’ love for His church Paul may have considered here. It is suggested that Paul might (among other things) also have thought about something like this:

*Self-transcending love made Jesus offer everything He had, without any assurance (‘while we were still sinners’) as to whether anybody would exercise his free will to respond appropriately.*

This love included an element of free choice on part of those who needed salvation and also the readiness of Jesus, to accept a “no”, if that was what some really wanted. The concept that humans have a choice as to whether they want to follow God or not, is deeply engrained in the message of the whole Bible. There were two trees in Eden (Gen 2-3), Moses and Joshua asked the Israelites, whether they really wanted to follow God (Deut 28, Jos 24) and all the prophets invited God’s people to turn back to Him (as opposed to God forcing people back to him). All these examples clearly document that the God of the Scriptures that Paul preached put great effort into providing an environment that would give humans at least some chance to choose<sup>63</sup>. Paul must have certainly understood this principle very well, as he was actively involved in bringing people to a point, where they could choose to follow God. Also, this principle did not stop after people started to follow Jesus, it continued for the rest of the Christian life. In the words of Paul: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” (Col3:2) and “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Gal 5:1). These exhortations make it clear that Christians have to choose every day whether to live with God in the spirit (or without him in the flesh; see Rom 5-8). This way of treating humans is fundamentally different from the forceful approach of “the ruler of this world”. In the words of Jesus: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (Jo 10:10). It is not the scope of this paper to explore this rich symbolism further. The goal here is only to demonstrate that in Paul’s thinking it must have been absolutely clear that we as humans have some choice in whether we respond to God’s

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<sup>63</sup> Given the widespread human belief in the inevitability of fate, this is a rather remarkable property of Paul’s message.

love or not and that this choice is a choice that we have to make again and again every day, as God does not force us<sup>64</sup>.

With this backdrop, Paul's comparison of marriage with the relationship of Jesus and His bride, the church, suddenly acquires a new dynamic. Paul clearly introduced this comparison, because he believed that it was useful for teaching Christians to improve their marriages. Thus he must have believed that a Christian's relationship with Jesus could help one's understanding of marriage and a good marriage might help one's understanding of the Gospel. Here it is proposed that this theological background made Paul explicitly or implicitly believe that the following principles (among others) were important for a good marriage:

1. **Anybody who falls in love** is willing to bring (sometimes extraordinary) sacrifices to win the heart of the beloved, just as Jesus sacrificed Himself for us.
2. **Anybody who learns of such love** has a right to choose as to whether to respond to that love and accept the related sacrifices or not, just as Jesus gives us the right to say "yes" or "no". Accepting a "no" requires inner strength and sometimes lots of it on part of the lover.
3. **These dynamics hold on a "big" level** like "I will marry that person" or "I will follow Jesus in principle".
4. **These dynamics hold on a "small" level**, i.e. on a day-to-day basis (e.g. "Will I agree with my partner or object" and "Will I follow Jesus' example today, when I will meet my personal enemy").
5. **These dynamics hold especially when it comes to sex**, which symbolizes the heart of marriage and thus also a Christian's relationship to Jesus. In other words, every single

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<sup>64</sup> This principle is independent from the fact that Paul was not impartial and openly talked about what he believed to be the consequences of the various options.

time, when one partner invites the other to have sex, the other partner is entitled to say “yes” or “no” and to have the “no” respected.

We shall leave aside the strain that a particular history of “no” decisions can leave on a relationship, even if accepted. If a “no” is not respected, a power struggle is likely to ensue. Often the struggle is evinced verbally but there may be physical action if neither party will compromise. Particularly destructive in such a power struggle is the use of physical power against an “unwilling” partner. If power is used to facilitate sexual intercourse, this is termed “rape” in contemporary language. No equivalent term existed in Paul’s world (see the list of Greek words that could be applied to rape given in footnote 47). In the patriarchic society of Paul’s day, men literally owned “their” women, who were second-class citizens (or no citizens at all, if slaves). Such ownership must have implied for many men that they treated their wives as objects that had to “function” as expected, anytime, anywhere. If a woman did not “function as intended”, some men must have been tempted to use force to “make her function”. Any violation of principle (2) above is damaging. Within a marriage, this damage could be described as perversion of the nature of the relationship, as a relationship that is supposed to provide safety and should be based on mutual trust is suddenly perverted into a jail of terror where trust is betrayed.

If Paul really believed in the biblical importance of choice (we have all reason to assume this based on e.g. Col 3:1; Jos 24:15); if Paul really compared the relationship between husband and wife with the relationship of Jesus and the church (this is what he writes); if Paul really believed that men and women are equal and should both be treated with dignity (this is the Gospel of Jesus who did more for women than anybody before him); if Paul recognized the devastating effects of a patriarchic society on women (he would only need to ask his female coworkers what they thought about Jesus’ teaching on women); if Paul was clever enough to

connect a few dots (his writings certainly suggest that); then he must have realized that rape within marriage or elsewhere was deeply incompatible with the Gospel of peace (Eph 6:15). This implies that Paul's theology had a very modern understanding of rape as something evil, although Paul's way of reaching such a conclusion may not necessarily be modern.

**How could Paul explain this concept?** In the sexually active city of Corinth Paul *must* have been confronted with husbands who raped their wives and other occasions of rape (in the unlikely case that Paul had never encountered this before). If Paul wanted to explain to the Corinthians as part of his preaching of the Gospel of peace that rape really was a grave sin that was deeply incompatible with the Kingdom of God, then what words could he have used in Greek? Consistent with the missing cultural sensibilities, ancient Greek does not have a dedicated word for forced sexual intercourse or any sexual harassment for that matter. Any Greek words occasionally translated as "rape" in English, fail to capture the essence of rape and usually carry various overtones that have nothing to do with rape and would have easily been abused by Paul's listeners to miss his intended meaning (see the list of Greek words that could be applied to rape given in footnote 47). If Paul would have written a letter to the Corinthians without ever having visited them before, the easiest thing to do would have been to come up with a concise explanation of rape that was easy to understand and not too long (new words are not likely to be introduced in writing without providing an explanation for the readers). However Paul lived for 18 months in Corinth and built the church by meeting many people and explaining the Gospel to them personally. Such verbal communication fundamentally changes the dynamics of the introduction of new words.

Concise words are often preferred to lengthy explanations, especially if a certain concept is used over and over again. Thus, if Paul wanted to preach against rape, he needed a one-word

definition. We will never know, what alternatives Paul considered before he coined “αρσενοκοίται”, or whether a local tradition had invented “αρσενοκοίται” before and Paul was merely using an existing term that has not to our knowledge been used by other writers before Paul. What we can say is that “αρσενοκοίται” is certainly not a bad choice for denoting “rapists”. Thus the evidence above suggests that its most appropriate literal translations for the writings of Paul are:

αρσενοκοίται:

- “[those who use the equivalent of] male [force to get sexual] intercourse”
- “physical might intercourse doers”
- “rapists”, including all heterosexual and homosexual rape.

Explaining this verbally is very easy and if this was a part of what Paul preached as the Gospel in Corinth, then the church must have known it so that Paul could easily refer to it in a letter. Using such a strange word in a letter also had the advantage that nobody could accuse anybody in possession of the letter of subverting Roman household morals<sup>65</sup>.

Thus translating “αρσενοκοίται” as “rapists” is highly consistent with Paul’s theological interpretation of marriage and with the literal meaning of the parts of the word. This translation includes the meaning of “homosexual slavetraders” (they use force to break the persons they

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<sup>65</sup> Allowing wives to refuse the sexual desires of their husbands or even slaves those of their masters must have been considered as dangerous for social stability by most ancient Roman citizens. The first Christians faced massive charges of subverting Roman morality, which depended on the submission of the weak under the strong, of slaves under masters, of wives under husbands, of provinces under Rome and of everybody under Caesar. Mounting persecution must have made Paul very careful about what he wrote in his letters as convincingly argued in: Chapter 11 “An ethic of liberation” in B. J Walsh & S. C. Keesmaat (2004) “Colossians Remixed”, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.

want to sell as slaves) and a much wider range of related forceful activities connected to sex, which could also happen within a marriage. However it does neither include consensual homosexual acts nor consensual anal intercourse between a man and a woman.

**Application to “μαλακοί”.** Similar reasoning might be used to suggest an additional meaning for “μαλακοί” that applies the more general translation to Paul’s sexual ethics, as derived from his understanding of marriage. This suggests translating

μαλακοί

- “morally weak persons”
- “persons without a moral backbone”
- “[those who are so] soft [in their inner being that they cannot accept a ‘no’ from someone they offer their love to and thus have to resort to clever tricks to engineer situations where the other person does not feel free to say ‘no’]”
- includes “childmolesters”, but is not limited to the exploitation of children.

The big difference from rape is the absence of the use of physical force. Such social engineering could typically include the exploitation of a position of authority to elicit sex from someone who would not dare to say ‘no’ to the person with the authority. Again such a concept had a wide applicability in Corinth, as there were certainly many cases of “sex with slaves” and “sex with children” that would be described by such a condition. Among other moral evils that Paul would have seen in such acts, he would have objected to the absence of the possibility to choose, which breaks the symbolism of sexual relationships as a picture of how Jesus treats His church.

The explanations provided here might help to understand, why Paul called marriage a “mystery”: he must have believed that it contains many hidden gems that are not easily found by casual observers. It is beyond the scope of this article to further explore the many interesting and

liberating aspects that follow from Paul's mystery of marriage as explained above. It suffices to say that they certainly would have been worthy of someone of the stature of the Paul, who could certainly fill his 18 months in Corinth with teachings that his audience would have found both interesting and relevant. An important part in such teaching must have been the aspect of walking together through the good times and the bad times in life that Paul recognized<sup>66</sup> in God's relationship with Israel (that is frequently compared with a marriage in the OT), as all humans in relationships have to work through issues, if they want to continue the relationship. The power of life-long monogamy could then easily be understood from the fact that spending more time together allows for deeper and more intimate knowledge of the partner and thus offers more opportunities to grow in inner wholeness and love<sup>67</sup>.

In the following section we shall investigate additional Biblical texts that must have played a role in shaping Paul's opinion on homosexuality

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<sup>66</sup> 1 Cor 10:1-11

<sup>67</sup> Paul would have certainly agreed with the statement in 1 John 4:20 that it is not possible to love God (the unseen) when we hate our brother (the seen). He might also have extended this principle to include as brothers those people we know best and since we know best who we spend most of our time with in closest proximity, Paul might have argued that a life-long monogamous marriage really tests how deep our commitment really is, when we say that we "love God", even though we have never seen Him. Paul would have recognised that it takes two to make such a marriage work (1 Cor 7:15).

## **8. Paul's understanding of Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and Peter's vision.**

With the new interpretation above in mind, we can approach the question, how Paul might have understood other important biblical texts with potential implications for his views on homosexuality.

**Genesis 2.** How could Paul have understood the profound statement that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18)? It is certain that Paul regarded heterosexual marriage as God's answer to the problem for the majority of people, as this is how the problem is resolved in Gen 2:21-24. But trained in rabbinic sharp-wittedness, he must have realized that Gen 2:18-25 does not prohibit anything and can hardly qualify as an exhaustive list of permissible approaches to social life. If one was to use Gen 2 as law, one could even argue that being single is worse than living in a committed long-term homosexual relationship, because God clearly identified loneliness as "not good". Thus there is little reason to believe that Paul would have seen Gen 2 as contradicting the position that God does not condemn committed loving long-term homosexual relationships.

**Genesis 18.** Although the story of Sodom and Gomorrah has played a prominent part in the condemnation of homosexual behavior throughout church history, there is little reason to believe that Paul would have considered these texts as a proof for God's disapproval of loving consensual long-term homosexual relationships. The main reasons he might have cited would be that Scripture itself gave other reasons for God's judgment on these cities (e.g. a lack of social justice, Ez 16:49-50). Paul would have been aware that Jesus ranked the lack of repentance in some of the towns with the highest moral standards in Israel as worse than Sodom (Mt 11:20-24), which puts any sins of Sodom into perspective. The actual story of the angels' visit in Sodom condemns the breaking of the eminently important Mediterranean code of hospitality; if the story

had a sexual component as frequently assumed by interpreters and possibly by Paul, then rape and some other sexual vices would have been the crime, but there is no indicator that homosexuality *per se* caused God to destroy Sodom<sup>68</sup>.

**Moses' Law and Isaiah.** How could Paul have interpreted the clear prohibitions of homosexual behavior in Lev 18+20? His sharp rabbinic mind most probably alerted him to differences in the approach to eunuchs in the OT. Isaiah 56:3-5 proclaims that God will honor eunuchs who honestly serve God, despite Moses' clear prohibition that forbade eunuchs to enter the assembly of Israel (Deut 23:1-2). Paul must have known these statements. He most probably interpreted this as a situation where a law was no longer applicable, because it had fulfilled its historic purpose (prevent Israel from falling into idolatry by engaging in pagan rituals of emasculation as probably in use by nations neighboring the promised land). It is not a very far step to apply the same logic to the Leviticus prohibitions of homosexual acts, as these were also given in the context of idolatry. Thus it appears safe to assume that Paul considered the Levitical prohibitions of homosexuality as 'fulfilled' once idolatry and other sexual vices were eradicated.

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<sup>68</sup> It is difficult to ascertain if Paul would have known the thoughts expressed in Judas 7. If yes, he probably would have just considered these as another reference to the many sexual vices that he himself preached against. Jude condemns a strong form of porneia (ἐκπορνεύσασαι) and "going after other flesh" (σαρκός ἐτέρας), where the Greek root for "other" in this phrase interestingly gave rise to the first part of our word hetero-sexuality. What Jude probably meant was a lifestyle of chasing sexual encounters with other people ('strangers'?) while reducing them to objects out of "flesh", without any regard for their dignity as persons. Such an attitude could of course result in homosexual acts as well, but there is no evidence that Jude specifically targeted homosexual acts in general, while excusing equivalent heterosexual acts. Other potential (but less likely) suggestions for what Jude meant might include sex with animals and sex with angelic beings as alluded to in Gen 6:1-4. Since Jude does not use any Greek words that clearly denote homosexual behavior, even though he must have known them as well as Paul, strongly suggests that he did not specifically address homosexual behavior.

**Jesus.** Paul must have known that Jesus explicitly stated that there is neither male nor female in heaven (Mt 22:30), a strong statement that puts any issues with sexuality and gender into perspective, as it suggests that marriage is a symbol that will pass away, once the corresponding reality will have arrived<sup>69</sup>. Paul also must have known Jesus' statement about eunuchs:

“<sup>11</sup> Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> For there are eunuchs, who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” (Mt19:11-12, NRSV)

This statement is Jesus' answer to the disciples' depressing conclusion that “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry”, which follows after Jesus' explanation of divorce (Mt 19:10). The disciples must have meant “marry a woman”, as that was the only acceptable form of marriage in their culture. Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples' conclusion, which must have sounded strange to Jews, who considered it their duty to marry. Instead Jesus lists three groups of people for whom it is indeed better not to enter heterosexual marriage, albeit without discussing other potential life-styles. One such group was “eunuchs from birth” and there is no reason to narrow this definition down to males with physical defects in their sexual organs. It equally applies to people, who have never been attracted to the other sex and thus cannot reasonably be expected to lead a successful marriage with someone from the other sex. Since the frequency of homosexuals is larger than the frequency of males with obvious defects in their sexual organs, it is very likely that Jesus and Paul consciously included homosexuals in the group of “eunuchs from birth”. Gen 2:18 proclaims that it is not good for man to be alone. Neither Jesus nor Paul nor any New Testament writer contradicts the notion that those “eunuchs from birth” who are attracted to the same sex could share life and bed with a same-sex partner that they loved in order

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<sup>69</sup> See Hebr 9:10 and Hebr 10:1 for a similar reasoning from a first century believer.

to avoid the loneliness that is labeled as “not good” in Gen 2:18. However, Jesus clearly warns twice that one can expect this topic to be surrounded by confusion, as not everybody will understand it (Mt 19:11+12d).

Such reasoning suggests that Paul considered it a matter of personal preference, choice and conscience what one does with one’s sexuality in this respect. The careful weighting of arguments for or against marrying a woman in 1Cor 7 confirms this view, as Paul leaves it to everyone to decide for oneself, what to do. The principles that Paul taught about sexual conduct between heterosexuals can be easily applied to homosexual relationships as well, making Paul’s ethic more general and powerful. The frequency with which Paul must have encountered homosexual relationships and even homosexual marriages<sup>70</sup>, combined with the absence of a single word against these relationships allows only one conclusion: Paul did not want to condemn them as Philo and other Jews did. Most probably he believed that this issue firmly belonged to the domain of personal decisions and conscience.

**Peter’s vision.** Paul must have known Peter’s vision from Acts 10:15, since Luke worked closely together with Paul. In that vision Peter was warned three times: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Peter needed this revelation to help him overcome his strong aversion towards any contact with heathens. There is no reason to suppose that Paul did not use the same revelation to help him overcome any aversions against homosexuals that he might have had as a former Pharisee.

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<sup>70</sup> Gay marriage was outlawed in the Roman Empire in 342 A.D (Boswell, 1980, p. 123) and there is ample evidence that it existed in the upper circles of Roman society at the time of Paul (Boswell, 1980, p.82-84; e.g. Nero officially married another male). Paul opposed Roman legislation that demanded that everybody married and produced children, but he also opposed what he called “demonic teachings” that included the prohibition to marry (1Tim 4:1-3). One is left wondering what he would think of current attempts to prohibit same-sex marriage.

### **9. Why did Paul not write anything positive about homosexual relationships?**

This question is very important from a CAHA perspective and touches many topics that are important for interpreting the Bible. A premise behind this question might be that only those things can be morally right, that are explicitly specified in the Bible as such. However, Paul could not have shared such a narrow approach, since Paul constantly did things that were not in his Bible, the OT. Likewise even the most sincere believer today does things that 'are not in the Bible'. Many of these things are morally neutral and thus no concern in serious debates. There is no reason to suggest that Jesus (John 8:31-36) or Paul (Gal 5:1, Rom 14:14) would have objected to such freedom. The interpretation above suggests that responsible loving homosexual relationships for homosexuals fall into this category. Why then are there no affirming statements for the minority of homosexuals in the words of Jesus or Paul?

Jesus affirmed and encouraged minorities as part of his core ministry (Lk 4:18) and eventually said that He would have liked to talk about so many more things, but didn't because He knew nobody would understand Him (John 16:12).

As argued above, Paul certainly had ample opportunities to write about homosexuality. There are good reasons why he chose not to do this. It is well documented that Paul had an extraordinary great interest in saving his fellow Jews (Rom 9:1-5). Acutely aware that anything he wrote might eventually also circulate in the Jewish community, Paul must have been able to imagine the outcry that any mention of homosexuality as acceptable would have produced. After all, intolerance of homosexuality among Jews in the first century was one of the celebrated proofs of their moral superiority. Thus Paul most probably made the conscious decision not to write about homosexuality to avoid a rather obvious opportunity for his enemies to twist his words and

create confusion (2 Pet: 3:16). Under these circumstances the absence of any condemnation of homosexuality in texts that clearly speak about sexual sins was the closest Paul could get to affirm the individual freedom to choose between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. For everybody who knew the official Jewish position, this silence must have been deafening, especially if combined with the following statement:

*“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” (Rom 14:14, NRSV).*

One might argue that this is a rather convoluted chain of arguments and that may be true. However, that does not make this explanation wrong, especially since a similar chain of reasoning is necessary to infer that Paul actually opposed slavery despite some passages in his writings that might suggest otherwise (e.g. 1 Tim 6:1-3, Eph 6:5-8). Today there is no doubt that Paul indeed opposed slavery and that he merely did not talk openly about it, because he knew that this would do more harm than good to the nascent church under persecution from an empire that built its wealth on the back of slaves. For anyone who doubts the extraordinary difficulty that 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century believers had in ascertaining Paul’s opinion on slavery, a consultation of texts from that time is extraordinarily illuminating<sup>71</sup>. In those texts the proponents of slavery regularly

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<sup>71</sup> For an impressive demonstration of the force of biblical arguments in support of slavery, see Swartley, W. M. (1983) “Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women. Case issues in Biblical interpretation.”, Herald Press, Waterloo, Ontario. It is a worthwhile exercise in exegesis to try to prove from the Bible that the slave owners are indeed on the wrong side. Everybody who complains about the lack of clear statements in support of loving long-term homosexual relationships in the Bible has to compare this lack of clarity against the difficulties that previous generations had in proving the ethically much ‘simpler’ point that ‘slavery is wrong’.

accused others of disrespecting the Word of God if they argued that Paul did not share the traditional opinions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It would be a welcome surprise if the debate about homosexuality would be easier.

It is possible that Paul saw his lack of obvious statements on homosexuality as a temporary problem that would eventually be solved in a way similar to how he might have expected that the issues surrounding slavery and the role of women would eventually be solved. It is likely that Paul expected that a thorough application of the law of love in a community shaped by Christian values would eventually end slavery, free women and ensure that homosexuals would not be treated differently than heterosexuals. Paul may have regarded Jesus' mission to bring those marginalized in society into the Kingdom of God (Lk 4:18, Mt 22:8-10) as an 'inherent sell-by date' for any Gospel message that excluded homosexuals living in loving committed long-term relationships.

## 10. Sexual vices that Paul fought

As shown above Paul did not write anything to specifically condemn ordinary homosexual relationships despite their widespread existence at that time. This is not because he did not have the words to express this, as the texts from Philo have shown. Does that mean that any sexual behavior was acceptable to Paul? Certainly not! Here it is argued that the most comprehensive single list of sexual vices in the New Testament can be found in Paul's letter to those Christians who lived in the sex-fun capital<sup>72</sup> of the ancient world. Some of the terms in the following list apply to more than a sexual context, but that does not detract from their application in a sexual context. Paul lists in 1 Cor 6:9-10 groups of people who will not enter the Kingdom of God<sup>73</sup>:

- ἀδικοί (adikoi) = unrighteous; This is a large group that contains many aspects of the following vices and any unrighteous use of sexuality is included here as well. The power in the following words is in their increasing specificity.
- πόρνοι (pornoi) is frequently translated as „fornicators“ or „sexually immoral“. One might argue that these are people who do πορνεία (porneia) and that the heart of the matter is really unfaithfulness in the broadest sense and an unjust use of ones sexuality. The unfaithfulness is towards promises made to one's partner. With this meaning at its core it becomes easy to understand, why πορνεία is also used to denote idolatry in NT and LXX. It should be noted that prostitutes (πόρναι = pornai= the female form) are never listed in any NT vice list or condemned otherwise. The only exception to this rule is the trans-personal πόρνη Babylon, the source of all πορνεία, another mystery (Rev. 17) that

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<sup>72</sup> Κορινθιάζομαι meant to „practice fornication“ since Aristophanes, because Corinth was famous for its courtesans. See Liddell *et al.* (1996), *ibid.* p. 981.

<sup>73</sup> The translations presented here are condensed from Liddell *et al.* (1996) *ibid.* and Bauer, W *et al.* (2001) „*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., University of Chicago Press.

probably has the idolatrous aspects of πορνεία at its core. Paul certainly did not want to imply that females could not commit πορνεία; it is rather likely that he shared Jesus' compassion for those women (see Mt 21:31) who either could not see another way to earn their living except to work in this most difficult occupation or who were literally owned by their slave masters and had no other choice, if they wanted to stay alive. Please note that πόρνοι is different from μοιχοί.

- ειδωλολάτραι (eidoololatrai) = idol worshippers. It is very likely that Paul had enough psychological understanding to recognize some structural similarities between the dynamics of idolatry and addictions in general that include sex addictions.
- μοιχοί (moichoí) = adulterers. This is very specific, as one needs to be married to be able to do this.
- μαλακοί (malakoi) = morally weak people, cowards. As explained above, this could include also people who are too 'soft' to take a 'no' in sexual matters for an answer and would thus use their authority or other means to rob potential sexual partners of the legitimate possibility to refuse any advances (see above). Such an interpretation includes "child molesters".
- αρσενοκοίται (arsenokoítai) = rapists, i.e. people who use physical force to gain access to sex (see above)
- κλέπται (kleptai) = thieves, please note the inner connection with the previous two groups that steal the personal power of people to decide freely in sexual matters.
- πλεονέκται (pleonektai) = those who claim more than their due, greedy, grasping, arrogant. This can apply to sexuality as well as material and other possessions.

- μέθυστοι (methusoi) = drunkards. Now as then, drinks and drugs reducing normal levels of control can lead to irresponsible sexual and other behavior.
- λοιδοροί (loidoroi) = the verbally abusive, revilers. This includes the use of words from the semantic field of sexuality in a derogatory sense.
- ἄρπαγες (harpages) = robbers, extortionists, swindlers, rapists. While this word includes rapists, its first meaning (robbers) will probably overshadow all others.

In addition, our reading of Romans 1 above suggests that Paul most probably disapproved of forcing oneself to take part in sexual acts that were not compatible with one's own sexual orientation ("against nature"), but again he does not condemn people who had this done to them. The latter point must have been so obvious in the early church that nobody needed to spell this out. Any other reading would imply the condemnation of large numbers of slaves in the church who had to attend to the sexual wishes of their masters. It is hardly conceivable that such an exclusion of a large part of the early church would not have been debated in the New Testament.

In other texts Paul discusses additional vices that also have sexual aspects:

- ἀσέλγεια (aselgeia) = licentiousness, wanton violence, insolence, extravagance, lasciviousness, lewdness. At its core is lack of inner constraints that should be there and such lack of constraint could also apply to sexual behavior, but is by no means restricted to it. See Eph 4:19, Rom 13:13, 2Cor 12:21, Gal 5:19. See also Mk 7:20-23, 2Pet 2:2.
- ἀκαθαρσία (akatharsia) = uncleanness, foulness (of a wound), dirt, filth, depravity (in a moral sense), ceremonial impurity. See 2 Cor 12:21, which speaks of the uncleanness of the heart as Jesus taught it (Mk 7:20-23).

There is also a word that could have sexual overtones and could denote a force for good or a force for bad, depending on its context and situation:

- ἐπιθυμία (epitymia) = desire, yearning, passion, appetite, longing after, desire for, inclination towards, sexual desire, lust. This could be positive (e.g. Lk 22:15, 1Th 2:17) and negative (e.g. Rom 7:7, Gal 5:24), where Paul sometimes needed to specify the negative nature of the desires for clarification (e.g. 1Tim 6:9, Col 3:5) and sometimes but by far not always it had sexual overtones (e.g. 1Th 4:3-5, 2Ti 2:22). Paul expected followers of Jesus to channel their desires in a good direction.

This list shows that Paul had indeed much to say about sexual ethics. It also shows that the various vices are not limited to a particular form of sexuality and thus heterosexual and homosexual relationships could be affected equally. Nowhere does Paul indicate that homosexual relationships could be a problem *per se*. However, for Paul it would go without saying that the highest law of love applies equally to homosexuals as it does to heterosexuals. Thus all the various nuanced aspects of how to deal with human sexuality, including the mystery of marriage and the resulting right to choose to decline sexual encounters would all apply to homosexual relationships as well. There is one more thing. In a debate that is as heated as that on homosexuality today, Paul would have a few other important principles on how to conduct such a debate.

## 11. How Paul might have dealt with the present controversy

Rom 14 gives some insight into how Paul dealt with extremely controversial topics. At that time the controversy was about whether Christians could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols or not. One does not need to think long about this problem from a biblical perspective to notice the enormous importance that this topic could develop in the minds of many believers.

Christians from non-western cultures who are more closely confronted with idolatry will particularly appreciate this. Paul took a surprisingly liberal stance, but his enthusiasm for freedom was moderated by his pastoral care for those who would lose their faith, if confronted with behavior that they believed was too liberal. Paul called the latter ones the “weak” in faith and he asked the “strong” to help the weak. His guiding principle was that nobody should do something that might make another Christian lose his faith. This has some interesting applications to the debate on homosexuality today. For example, Paul would expect liberals to moderate their way of life, if the faith of others could be endangered otherwise. However, if nobody’s faith is in immediate danger, but legalistic teachers demand that everybody keep their favorite laws, Paul could easily turn into a formidable opponent of such demands (see his letter to the Galatians). Finally Paul was convinced that everybody should do, as he is convinced: The weak should respect that the strong did things differently and the strong should not despise the weak or force them to “grow up”. He says:

“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” (Rom 14:4, NRSV).

It is very hard to say whether Paul would approve of consecrating an openly gay bishop at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if he would live today. He would certainly praise the efforts to make the Gospel relevant to our generation and he would certainly demand that any such bishop be a respectable person of the highest ethical standards. Whether he would think that this step might be premature and could cost some people their faith we do not know. Paul would certainly be painfully aware of the millions of homosexuals who suffer intolerably because they are ostracized from Christian communities and thus excluded from the eternal hope that Christians share<sup>74</sup>. Paul would further be aware of the many more millions especially in western societies, who cannot believe in a ‘good news’ that vilifies homosexuals who did not consciously choose

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<sup>74</sup> For some first hand accounts, see Germond, P & De Gruchy, S., editors, (1997) “Aliens in the household of God. Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa”, David Philip Publishers, Claremont, South Africa.

If Paul lived today, he would probably be aware of the existing, but rather low rates of success of ministries that attempt to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals. (Spitzer, R. L. (2003) “Can some gay men and lesbians change their sexual orientation? 200 participants reporting a change from homosexual to heterosexual orientation” Archives of Sexual Behavior Vol. 32, pp. 403-417. Pattison, E. M. & Pattison, M. L. (1980) “‘Ex-Gays’: Religiously mediated change in homosexuals” American Journal of Psychiatry Vol. 137, pp. 1553-1562. These studies do not allow estimating precise rates of success for homosexuals who desire change, but their approach to collecting data might be used to infer that success rates are rather low. For more details, see Spitzer (2003) *ibid.* and Holben, L. R. (2001), *ibid.*, pp. 53-94+266.

Paul would certainly applaud the important pastoral, restorational and inner healing work that is accomplished during many such counseling therapies and that is independent from attempts to change sexual orientation. However, Paul might also ask the question, if there is supportive counseling for persons that appear to be genetically homosexual, but have been bullied into miserable marriages by the expectations of others. One can be certain that Paul would rejoice in the inner healing of a genetically heterosexual person that previously had become a secondary homosexual due to traumatic experiences. This work here suggest that he probably also would rejoice in the inner healing of a genetically homosexual person that had become a secondary heterosexual due to peer pressure, where healing in this case would imply accepting homosexuality.

their sexual orientation and often have to suffer in no small way from secular society because of it<sup>75</sup>. The Paul who wrote in the New Testament would most probably strongly oppose the viewpoints of the modern equivalents of Philo and the Pharisees, who presume to have “solutions” for the “problem”, although only few know homosexuals and their struggles personally. One could argue that Paul might have less difficulty with an openly gay bishop who lives in a committed relationship to high ethical standards than with a teaching that forbids marriage for bishops and thus removes them from an important point of contact with ordinary people<sup>76</sup>.

From a CAHA perspective one might argue that Paul’s discussion of food in Rom 14 can hardly qualify to guide us in matters of such importance as sexuality. However, such a limitation of Rom 14 is not justified, as a thorough investigation will show that the key problem with that food is the associated danger of idolatry and the symbolism of eating what was sacrificed to idols, which some might understand as a participation in idolatry. Paul regards any connection to any idol as something extremely dangerous and there are few things that are as clearly condemned in the Scriptures as idolatry. Thus Paul’s discussion of such food touches the core of the faith (see also Acts 15).

Any condemnation of a loving faithful homosexual relationship can only hinge on the argument that it might confuse some symbols that God has placed in the world<sup>77</sup>. However, this

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<sup>75</sup> Just consider the consistently derogatory references to homosexuals among many sports fans and in many comedians’ jokes.

<sup>76</sup>One might argue that an unmarried bishop misses an important source of insight into spiritual dynamics, as he can know the mystery of marriage only from secondary sources. We can only speculate what Paul might have thought of restrictions to marriage in the light of his experiences with the Cybele-Attis cult (1Ti 4:1-5).

<sup>77</sup> Example: In marriage two different aspects of the image of God unite (man and woman).

presumes that one knows all symbols that God uses and one has to judge others without being able to see all the facts<sup>78</sup>. Paul warned against such judgments, as everybody will be responsible for one's own actions and we are notoriously bad at judging what is between other persons and God (Rom 14:4). Marriage is an important symbol, but marriage was certainly made for man and not man for marriage, just as with the Sabbath (Mk 2:27). The Sabbath is an extremely important symbol (see e.g. Ex 20:8-11, Is 56:2-6, Heb 4:9) and another very clear case can be constructed against the eating of blood (see e.g. Gen 9:4, Lev 3:17, Lev 17:10-14, Acts 15:20+29). Paul clearly warned of condemning people based on the symbols they consider important or not (Col 2:16-23), while at the same time he called for respecting the personal conscience in matters of personal decisions (Rom 14:2-3+23) and avoiding acts that could destroy the faith of weak believers (Rom 14:15 + 15:1). We have all reason to believe that Paul does not limit the fundamental freedom to express symbols in ones life when it comes to homosexual relationships.

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<sup>78</sup> For example, the diversity of human sexuality may symbolize the creativity of God that is observed elsewhere in the created world, including in the diversity of sexual behavior in animals and in the diversity of ways that animals and plants use to reproduce. This diversity could teach us to accept our different personalities and cultures just as God accepts us. Treating strangers kindly is an important topic throughout the Bible (e.g. Deut 10:18-19; Mt 25:31-46; Rom 12:13) and requires an active appreciation of such diversity. Therefore, one might argue that homosexuals have an important part in enabling cultures to love strangers, just as God commanded (Deut 10:19). This does not include conscious compromises with sin. The core symbolism of marriage explained above is independent from one's sexual orientation and may thus be equally well implemented by a homosexual couple. Thus, homosexual acts *per se* do not necessarily violate a deep spiritual symbolism more than heterosexual acts *per se*. The important violations are determined by the circumstances of these acts. Symbols have no meaning to people who do not believe in them. Such people need to find other means to construct a sexual ethic that respects the dignity of every human being.

## **12. Conclusions, and an appeal for a fresh debate about interpretation**

We can say that Paul most probably opposed homosexuality like Philo and many of his fellow Jewish believers in the first century – before his conversion. His “Damaskus experience” and more than a decade of intense reevaluation of his beliefs in the light of the message of Jesus transformed Paul profoundly. He became very careful to avoid any similarities with the law-teaching that so many of his opponents did. He even said, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” (Phil 3:7). Thus it is not appropriate to treat the writings of Paul and Philo as if they came from the same group. As shown above, Paul’s new sexual ethics is certainly much more compatible with the 21<sup>st</sup> century than that of Philo. If Paul did not condemn homosexuality in itself as demonstrated here, then this opens the way for a new understanding of the New Testament on this topic, as the classical interpretation of Paul’s writings has been the bedrock of any Christian condemnation of homosexuality.

The new interpretation offered here appears to be fully compatible with a high view of Scripture, rigorous exegesis and all the basic tenets of the Christian faith. It does not require any higher criticism of the Bible to arrive at properly reasoned conclusions. It does however require from some readers a substantial personal willingness (and time investment) to revisit what might be termed ‘assumptions’ which have been handed down through the ages – at least it did for the author of this study. Paul’s more experienced contemporaries were well aware that some aspects in Paul’s teaching were hard to understand (2 Pet 3:16). Could this also apply to Rom 1:18-32, 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10?

The far-reaching implications of the conclusions presented here require a particularly thorough examination of the evidence. If the non-discriminatory way of interpreting Paul as described above survives such scrutiny, it could help reconcile major rifts in contemporary churches and societies. While such a process might lead to a temporary increase in controversy, it is expected to be overall beneficial, mostly on the grounds that followers of Jesus are bound to follow the truth as good as they can, wherever it may lead. Whether this implies the overturning of the results from this study or the overturning of centuries of tradition must not matter.