

Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23–28

JERAMY TOWNSLEY

jeramy@jeramyt.org

Butler University, Indianapolis, IN 46202

Romans 1:23–28 is one of the primary texts from the NT used to justify the contemporary condemnation of both male and female homosexuals by some religious groups. This article contextualizes this passage as a unified attack on idolatry by reidentifying the subjects of the “gay” and “lesbian” behavior¹ in vv. 26–27 as participants in the widespread goddess cults that posed a direct threat to Paul’s ministry. These individuals violated patriarchal norms of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality in very public ways, and also most twenty-first-century readers’ predominant experiences of heteronormativity—I refer to the subjects of the Pauline passage with the postmodern term “queer.”²

¹ When referring to Greco-Roman sexualities, typically I will refer to behavior, since it is doubtful that there was a “gay/straight” dichotomy in the modern sense—thus the use here of the terms “heterogenital” and “homogenital.” See Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17–26; Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World* (trans. Cormac Ó Cuilleain; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 211–22; David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 48–55; Gerard Loughlin, “Pauline Conversations: Rereading Romans 1 in Christ,” *Theology and Sexuality* 11 (2004): 72–102, here 86; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 109; Diana Swancutt, “The Disease of Effemination,” in *New Testament Masculinities* (ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson; SemeiaSt 45; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 193–235, here 194–95; Johannes Vorster, “The Making of Male Same-Sex in the Graeco-Roman World and Its Implications for the Interpretation of Biblical Discourses,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 432–54; Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 249–51.

² Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, “Reenforcing Binaries, Downgrading Passions: Bisexual Invisibility in Mainstream Queer Christian Theology,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 10 (2010): 54–63; Adam

Several lines of research converge to allow an interpretation that rejects the assumption that Paul here condemns “gays” and “lesbians.” First, the hypothesis that “gay”/“lesbian”/“straight” identities existed in this Greco-Roman-Jewish context is dubious. Second, the interpretation of 1:26b as referring to female homogeneity should be rejected. Third, the grammatical connection between the females in 1:26 and the males in 1:27 does not imply a relationship in the “identity” of these subjects (female and male homosexuals), but rather in action (the exchange of natural behaviors). Fourth, the natural versus unnatural behaviors (*παρὰ φύσιν*) likely refers not to an exchange of the identity categories “straight” for “gay” but to non-procreative sex (or perhaps an inversion of patriarchal gender norms). Fifth, the structural and rhetorical unity of the passage seems incongruous if one assumes the dominant contemporary interpretation regarding “gay” and “lesbian” behaviors as archetypal sins followed by a more “minor” list of sins that includes, for example, murder (Rom 1:29). Finally, this era witnessed the wide growth of goddess sects whose cross-gender and sexual practices violated patriarchal norms, giving Paul graphic imagery to refer the audience back to them. This final point is the core of this article, reciprocally supporting the first five pieces of evidence.

I. ROMANS 1:23–28—GAYS OR IDOLATERS?

(1) 23 and [they] changed [*ἠλλάξαν*] the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of fowls, and of quadrupeds, and of reptiles. 24 Wherefore also God did give them up [*παρέδωκεν*], in the desires of their hearts, to uncleanness, to dishonour their bodies among themselves;

(2) 25 who did change [*μετήλλαξαν*] the truth of God into a falsehood, and did honour and serve the creature rather than the Creator. . . . 26 Because of this did God give them up [*παρέδωκεν*] to dishonourable affections,

(3) for even their females [*θῆλειαι ἀνθρώπων*] did change [*μετήλλαξαν*] the natural use [*φυσικὴν χρῆσιν*] into that against nature [*παρὰ φύσιν*]; 27 and in like manner [*ὁμοίως*] also the males having left the natural use [*φυσικὴν χρῆσιν*] of the female, did burn in their longing toward one another. . . . 28 And, according as [*καὶ καθὼς*] they did not approve of having God in knowledge, God gave them up [*παρέδωκεν*] to a disapproved mind, to do [*ποιεῖν*] the things not seemly.³

Green, “Queer Theory and Sociology,” *Sociological Theory* 25 (2007): 26–45; Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 51–64; Jeremy Punt, “Intersections in Queer Theory and Postcolonial Theory, and Hermeneutical Spin-Offs,” *Bible and Critical Theory* 4 (2008): 24.1–24.16, online at <http://bibleandcriticaltheory.org/index.php/bct/article/view/197>.

³ [Robert] Young’s Literal Translation (YLT), online at <http://www.ccel.org/bible/ylt/Romans/1.html> (accessed May 5, 2010). The Greek is from UBS⁴.

The structure of Rom 1:23–28 is framed around three parallels bracketed by *μετ/ἠλλάξαν* (“they exchanged”: vv. 23, 25, 26b) and *παρέδωκεν* (God “surrendered” them: vv. 24, 26a, 28).⁴ Parallelism is common in Hebrew literature and involves repeating a thought in different ways for emphasis and clarification. Paul uses it here to emphasize God’s response to idolatry.⁵ He describes people engaged in philosophies and religions that worship creation and created things, not YHWH. Moreover, and incongruously to the contemporary reader, he infuses each of the parallels with eroticism. He concludes that abandoning Yahweh leads to the “sin list” at the end of the chapter (vv. 29–31).

Both the first and second parallels (vv. 23–24, vv. 25–26a) explicitly describe idol worship common in the first century.⁶ In each passage, the people actively exchange something holy and true to worship that which is not YHWH, and God surrenders them to eroticisms. In the first, God surrenders (*παρέδωκεν*) them to some form of ritual impurity (*ἀκαθαρσίαν*) to do something with each other (*ἐν αὐτοῖς*) that disgraces their bodies (*τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν*). Robert Jewett asserts, “Almost all commentators . . . assume that the primary reference [of *σώματα αὐτῶν*] is sexual.”⁷ In the second parallel, God surrenders them to “erotic passions” (*πάθη ἀτιμίας*), with *πάθη* similarly having a sexual meaning, continuing the link between idolatry and sex.⁸

⁴ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “God Handed Them Over: Reading Romans 1:18–32 Apocalyptically,” *ABR* 53 (2005): 42–53; Johann D. Kim, “Romans 1:28–32,” *Int* 58 (2004): 396–98.

⁵ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 37–38; Douglas J. Moo, *Romans 1–8* (Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1991), 58–60; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 106.

⁶ John R. Levison emphasizes Paul’s theological grounding of Rom 1:18–25 in Genesis 1–3 (“Adam and Eve in Romans 1.18–25 and the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*,” *NTS* 50 [2004]: 519–34). He highlights the first two uses of *μετ/ἠλλάξαν* to demonstrate the relationship between this text and the Jewish text *Life of Adam and Eve*, demonstrating the similarities with other creation/fall texts of the era, especially how Paul draws the reader to the inversion of God’s original plan—specifically, the exchange of God’s glory for mortality and death, and the exchange of the dominion over animals for subservience to animals, referring to idolatry in the form of worshipping the images of animals. It is curious that Levison emphasizes the first two repetitions of *μετ/ἠλλάξαν* in vv. 23 and 25, but fails even to mention the third use of *μετ/ἠλλάξαν* in v. 28. This is typical of the historic difficulty in grasping the deeper unity of Rom 1:18–32, since, unless the entire pericope is understood as a three-part unified attack against idolatry, the inherent parallels may otherwise seem disjointed.

⁷ Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 169 n. 41.

⁸ “The *πάθη ἀτιμίας* of R. 1:26a are the scandalous vices of homosexuality, 1:26b, 27” (Wilhelm Michaelis, “*πάθος*,” *TDNT* 5:928). Erasmus, in his commentary on Romans, links *πάθη* in this verse to the eunuchs in Cleopatra’s court described by Horace, who themselves are associated with the goddess Isis: “effeminate lust . . . her herd of filthy men [corrupted] by disease” (*New Testament Scholarship*, vol. 16, *Annotations on Romans* [ed. Robert D. Sider; Collected Works of

The third parallel also is bracketed with *μετ/ήλλαξαν* and *παρέδωκεν*, but on a surface reading does not seem to follow the pattern described above. As before, God surrenders the subjects to a fallen state (v. 28, *ἀδόκιμον νοῦν*). But here we see an explicit sexual exchange, *φυσικὴν χρῆσιν*, for that which is *παρὰ φύσιν*, rather than a description of idol worship. One potential explanation is that the passage is about sin in general, not idolatry: Paul begins with idolatry and then finishes his thought in vv. 29–31, providing a larger sin list, with homosexuality representing an archetypal sin. However, a more likely interpretation is that the entire passage is about idolatry, with the third parallel referring to sacred sex, a common practice of certain sects in the first century. This frequently included homogeneity, and male–female *παρὰ φύσιν* sex.⁹

The grammar of the passage supports this latter interpretation. First, *καὶ καθὼς* (“since,” v. 28) takes a causal meaning,¹⁰ separating the previous discussion from the discussion that follows it, indicating that the homogenital behavior listed in vv. 26b–28 is part of a different clause than the sin list in vv. 29–32. Second, Chamberlain identifies *ποιεῖν* (“to do”) as the expegetical infinitive, used here to clarify what precedes it (vv. 23–27) by way of the example that follows it (vv. 29–32).¹¹ This seems to indicate a clear separation between the sex acts and the sin list, which places vv. 26b–27 with the previous verses (parallels on idolatry) rather than with the subsequent verses (the sin list). Preserving the single focus of the three parallels also helps to explain the persistent linkage of idolatry with eroticism in each of the parallels.

Romans 1:26b: Heterogenital or Homogenital?

The subjects of Rom 1:26b–27, who constitute one group, are connected not by “sexual orientation” but by religious affiliation. In order to accept that the third parallel continues the attack on idolatry, it is necessary to understand “sacred sex” and to problematize the “lesbian” identity of the subjects in v. 26b. This is the only verse in the OT or NT that is interpreted as an explicit reference to female homosexuality—but this has not always been the interpretation of this passage. In fact, Thomas D. Hanks says, “Not until John Chrysostom (ca. 400 c.e.) does anyone (mis)interpret Romans 1:26 as referring to relations between two women.”¹² Early

Erasmus 56; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994], 56; V. G. Kiernan, *Horace: Poetics and Politics* [New York: St. Martin's, 1999], 82).

⁹ James B. De Young, “The Meaning of Nature in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior,” *JETS* 31 (1988): 429–41.

¹⁰ Käsemann, *Romans*, 49; William Douglas Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1941), 176.

¹¹ Chamberlain, *Grammar*, 106.

¹² Hanks, *The Subversive Gospel: A New Testament Commentary on Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000), 90. See also Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity,*

commentators interpreted this passage as a reference not to female homogeneity but to nonprocreative, heterosexual acts. Clement of Alexandria, in *Paedagogus*, explains that, as a result of excessive lusts, the hare grows a new rectum every year because of heavy sexual use, and both male and female hyenas develop a special passage (non-vaginal, non-anal) for sexual penetration. In the latter case, Clement believes that this explains why conception is rare among hyenas—sperm is diverted from the passage designed for pregnancy. Thus, such acts are *παρὰ φύσιν* (“contrary to nature,” 86.1). Clement then ties this discussion directly back to Paul by quoting Rom 1:26b–27 (86.3), concluding his discussion with the following:

It is clear that we should reject sex between men, sex with the infertile, anal sex with women, and sex with the androgynous. We should obey nature’s prohibition through the genital structure—real men discharge semen, not receive it. As Jeremiah said . . . “The hyena’s cave has become my home,” . . . as a skilled allegory condemning idolatry. (87.3)¹³

Clement’s concern about sex *παρὰ φύσιν* assumes that sperm is being wasted; therefore it seems that a man must be involved in Rom 1:26b, not two women. Further, through the reference to Jeremiah, he ties the *παρὰ φύσιν* sex back to the worship of idols. It is my contention that this reference oriented the original reader to the sacred sex practices of the goddess cults. This also clarifies Clement’s reference to sex with the androgynous, a typical early characterization of the castrated and effeminate male priests of these religions, the *galli*. Confirming this interpretation of Clement, Bernadette J. Brooten quotes an early Christian commentator,

and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity (Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 383; Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Romans: A Note on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 86–87. While Chrysostom’s *Homily on Romans* is typically described as “anti-gay,” it can be recontextualized as anti-goddess instead. For example, *Homily 4*, which is tightly focused on Rom 1:26–27, seems to be an explicit discussion about the *galli*, using language evocative of this group of priests: *κύνα* (“dogs”), *εὐνούχους* (“eunuchs”), *ἀκρωτηριάζω* (“to cut off body parts”), and men who make themselves into women by destroying their manhood (John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Romanos* [PG 60:415–21], sections 3–4). Several other early Christian writers link Rom 1:26–27 to the sex practices of the goddess cults: Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 26; Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 7.2.4; Theodore de Bruyn, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 66.

¹³ The English above is a paraphrase of the Greek text in Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, vol. 1, *Protrepticus und Paedagogus* (GCS 12; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905), 210: Ἐντεῦθεν συμφανές ἡμῖν ὁμολογουμένως παραιτίσθαι δεῖν τὰς ἀρρενομιξίας καὶ τὰς ἀκάρπους σπορὰς καὶ τὰς κατόπιν εὐνάς καὶ τὰς ἀσυμφυεῖς ἀνδρογύνους κοινωνίας, ἐπομένους τῇ φύσει αὐτῇ ἀπαγορευούσῃ διὰ τῆς τῶν μορίων κατασκευῆς, οὐκ εἰς παραδοχὴν σπέρματος, εἰς δὲ τὴν πρόεσιν αὐτοῦ τὸ ἄρρεν ἀνδρωσάσῃ. Ὁ δὲ Ἱερεμίας ὀηνήκα ἂν φῆ, τοῦτ’ ἔστι δι’ αὐτοῦ τὸ πνεῦμα, «σπήλαιον ὑαίνης γέγονεν ὁ οἶκός μου», τὴν ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν σωμάτων μυστατόμενος τροφὴν ἀλληγορία σοφῆ τὴν εἰδωλολατρεῖαν διαβέβληκε.

Anastasios, who, in a marginal note on the above passage, dismisses the view that Paul was describing female homogenital acts, specifying that the women were not going to each other, but “offer themselves to men.”¹⁴

This association between idolatry and sex is present also in the *Apocalypse of Peter* (second century C.E.). The author describes the punishment for those who have sex in the context of idol worship; the text specifies men with men, and some kind of relationship between men and women, but absent is any clear reference to relationships between women.¹⁵ We also see mentioned a practice related to the Attic/Cybele rituals (which will be described later)—ritual castration (“cut their flesh as apostles”).

These are the worshippers of idols. . . . These are they which have cut their flesh as apostles of a man, and the women who were with them . . . and thus are the men who defiled themselves with one another in the fashion of women. . . . all idols, the works of men’s hands, and what resembles the images of cats and lions, of reptiles and wild beasts, and the men and women who manufactured the images, shall be in chains of fire.¹⁶

Similarly, Augustine seems to hold a nonhomogenital view of this passage, describing this context as nonprocreative, heterogenital intercourse, explaining that men wanted to have sex with women in parts of the body “not made for begetting children”:

In the apostle’s words concerning the wicked, *Having abandoned natural relations with a woman, they burned in their desires for one another, men treating men shamefully* (Rom 1:27), he did not speak of marital, but natural relations. He meant for us to understand those relations which are brought about by the members created for this purpose so that both sexes can be joined by them in order to beget children. For this reason, when anyone is united by these same members even to a prostitute, the relations are natural, though they are not praiseworthy, but sinful. But if one has relations even with one’s wife in a part of the body which was not made for begetting children, such relations are against nature and indecent. In fact, the same apostle earlier said the same thing about the women, *For their women exchanged natural relations for those which are against nature* (Rom 1:26). (*Nupt.* 20.35)¹⁷

¹⁴ See Brooten, *Love*, 337; see also Stählin, *Clemens*, 331: αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι οὐκ ἀλλήλας βαίνουσαι δηλαδὴ, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἀνδράσιν οὕτω παρέχουσαι ἑαυτάς. οὕτως Ἀναστάσιος ἐν τῷ εἰς τὴν πρὸς Κορινθίους ἐξηγητικῷ.

¹⁵ Brooten addresses this and assumes that the women here are engaged in female homogeneity (*Love*, 305–14). She explains, however, that this interpretation is clear only in the Greek fragment, admitting that the Ethiopic fragment is accepted as closer to the original.

¹⁶ Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; Eng. trans. ed. R. McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 2:676–77, Ethiopic fragment.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Answer to the Pelagians II: Marriage and Desire* 20.35 (ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Roland J. Teske; New York: New City Press, 1990), 75–76.

Slightly predating Augustine, Didymus the Blind twice quotes Rom 1:26–27 in his commentary on Zechariah. In both instances he uses it as an example of what happens to idolaters. In one of these he expands on Paul:

Men, having intemperate desires for other men, working disgrace; and their females left the natural use of females for that which is unnatural and pathological; and women had whorish desires for women.¹⁸

The question pertinent here is why Didymus would add the clarifying note that “women had whorish desires for women,” if this was already implied in the previous clause? It is reasonable to propose that arising in the fourth century there was controversy regarding Paul’s intent and that Didymus added what he felt Paul had mistakenly failed to include in his original condemnation of deviant sex.

Ambrosiaster is cited as an early source documenting Rom 1:26b as clearly referring to female homogeneity.¹⁹ However, this is only partially true—what we see is Ambrosiaster’s transition from a heterogeneity view to a homogeneity view. Several recensions exist for Ambrosiaster’s commentary on Romans, and the earliest recension has a clearly heterogeneity rendering: “[regarding examples of idolatry], namely, the women were offering themselves to men in ways contrary to nature.”²⁰ Brooten and Diana Swancutt both cite Ambrosiaster’s later recensions when they claim that he interpreted Rom 1:26b as female homogeneity. The edition by H. J. Vogels in CSEL makes Ambrosiaster’s transition clear by having the three recensions in parallel. It is not unreasonable to conclude, following John Boswell, that the fourth century represents the beginning of a successful cultural and political shift toward conservative, rural morality and government absolutism, both of which give preference to patriarchal hegemonies.²¹ Ambrosiaster’s textual revisions evidence the theological beginnings of this shift.

Another problem in interpreting Romans 1 is discerning Paul’s intended meaning of *παρὰ φύσιν* in v. 26b. For example, the behavior—exchanging the procreative purpose of sex for behaviors that could not produce children—could refer to sex with a barren or pregnant woman, sex with a menstruating woman, ped-

¹⁸ My translation; the Greek is from Didymus the Blind, *Sur Zacharie* (trans. Louis Doutreleau; 3 vols.; SC 83–85; Paris: Cerf, 1962), 3:828 (4.52.8): ἀκολάστως κατ’ ἀλλήλων ἐπιμαϊνόμενοι, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν καταπραΰζόμενοι τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην, ἀλλὰ καὶ αἱ θήλειαι αὐτῶν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θήλειας ἐάσασαι παρὰ φύσιν καὶ πάσχουσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ γυναῖκες ἐν γυναίξιν πορνικῶς ἐπιμαϊνόνται.

¹⁹ Brooten, *Love*, 356; Swancutt, “Disease of Effemination,” 208–9.

²⁰ My translation of the Latin “propter idolatriam . . . ut se viris feminae aliter quam natura dictavit offerrent.” See *Ambrosiastri qui dicitur Commentarius in Epistulas Paulinas* (ed. Henri J. Vogels; 3 vols.; CSEL 81.1–3; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1966–69), 1:50–51.

²¹ Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 119–24.

erasty, or sex between animals of different species.²² Philo, speaking as a Jewish contemporary of Paul, affirms that sex should occur only when procreation is possible: “those who sue for marriage with women whose sterility has already been proved with other husbands, do but copulate like pigs or goats, and their names should be inscribed in the lists of the impious as adversaries of God” (*Spec.* 3.34; trans. Colson, LCL). Similarly, regarding pederasty, he says that the active partner (the penetrating male) is *παρὰ φύσιν* because he “does not procreate.” In vv. 26b–27, Paul uses *παρὰ φύσιν* in the verse that involves at least one female (v. 26b), not the verse that clearly includes men. If the cultural use of the phrase in a sexual context indicates that a man was engaging in a behavior that prevented conception (wasting sperm), it seems that Paul here refers to heterogenital sex that prevents procreation, such as anal or oral sex. Several recent analyses of *παρὰ φύσιν* support this position.²³ Similarly, David Fredrickson’s analysis of *χρησις* (“use”) finds no examples of a female “using” another female, while he does find a reference to the “wife’s use of the husband,” which he believes is parallel to Rom 1:26b.²⁴

John J. McNeill, Boswell, and Nissinen argue that *παρὰ φύσιν* refers to inherent “heterosexuals” who experiment with homogeneity.²⁵ If this were true, however, it would leave the contemporary reader to judge an individual’s sexual behavior based on some ability to determine their “true” heterosexual or homosexual nature. This position ignores the profoundly social and historically fluid nature of sexualities, as well as stigmatizing bisexuals as much as previous authors have stigmatized homosexuals.²⁶ Others emphasize that *παρὰ φύσιν* refers to patriarchal social inversion, that the “man who acts like a woman” and the “woman who

²² Jamie Banister, “*ὁμοίως* and the Use of Parallelism in Romans 1:26–27,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 569–90, here 572 n. 4; Brooten, *Love*, 247; Roy Ward “Why Unnatural? The Tradition behind Romans 1:26–27,” *HTR* 90 (1997): 263–84, here 271–73; De Young, “Meaning of Nature,” 429–41; Martin, *Sex*, 54–57; James Miller, “The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual,” *NovT* 37 (1995): 1–11, here 8–10.

²³ Brooten, *Love*, 325; De Young, “Meaning of Nature”; David Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27,” in *Homosexuality, Science and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (ed. David L. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 197–222; Ward, “Why Unnatural?”

²⁴ Fredrickson, “Unnatural Use,” 201, here referring to Plutarch, *Conjugalia praecepta* (*Advice to Bride and Groom*). Fredrickson argues that “use” refers to inordinate sexual desire within marriage, not idolatry.

²⁵ McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (updated ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1993), 41–42; Boswell, *Social Tolerance*, 109–10; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 109.

²⁶ Bernhardt-House, “Reenforcing Binaries,” 54–63. McNeill, Boswell, and Nissinen all assume that Rom 1:26b refers to female homogeneity, but it does not seem that their larger perspective requires it. If their point is that *παρὰ φύσιν* in v. 26b refers to heterosexual males engaging in homosexual behaviors in v. 27, the case could also be made for females who violate their sexual identities as “childbearers” (a common patriarchal view of women at the time) and allow men to have *παρὰ φύσιν* sex with them in v. 26b.

acts like a man” threatened Roman constructions of masculinity and thus society as a whole.²⁷ There is no necessary contradiction between this view and the perspective offered here, that Rom 1:26b–27 is a specific example of the queer identities and sexual practices in the goddess cults; these interpretations may supplement each other. For example, Swancutt describes Roman virulence against Cybele and her effeminate, eunuch priests in terms of the perceived threat they posed to Roman masculinity and political stability.²⁸ In the social milieu of this threat, Paul and his readers may have been particularly sensitized to the goddess cults because of the intersection of these two important elements—idolatry and patriarchy—which potentially clarifies Paul’s use of sexuality in 1:26b–27 as an example of idolatry.

With regard to the question of 1:26b as a reference to female homogeneity, Jamie Banister analyzes *ὁμοίως* (“likewise”), the connecting word between v. 26 and v. 27, and determines that this connector does not imply that v. 27 should be used to limit the meaning of v. 26.²⁹ Even though two men are involved in the clause following *ὁμοίως*, the word does not lead to the conclusion that the clause preceding it involves two women, only that both clauses are examples of some larger idea, in this case that some kind of natural use was exchanged (v. 26b) or abandoned (v. 27) for something else. In this case, Banister suggests as possibilities that a woman could be using an *ἄλισβος* (phallus) on herself, that a woman could be using an *ἄλισβος* with a man, or that men were having oral or anal sex with women.³⁰ Swancutt comes to the same conclusion, explaining that if *ὁμοίως* follows other usages in the NT, it indicates that “the important connection between Rom 1:26 and 27 is the *action*, the ‘exchange/forsaking of the natural use for what is contrary to nature’”;³¹ *ὁμοίως* is not intended to show similarity between the *subjects* of the two sentences. It thus seems unlikely that the original audience would necessarily have heard Rom 1:26b as a reference to “lesbians.”

If one assumes that 1:26b is a reference to female homogeneity, the question persists why Paul would bother to mention it, and especially preceding male sex, when female sex is rarely mentioned in ancient literature, and not at all in the OT. The Judaic traditions from which Paul was drawing³² have almost no discussion of

²⁷ Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Contraversions; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 140–42; Diana Swancutt, “Still before Sexuality,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele; Biblical Interpretation Series; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 11–62.

²⁸ Swancutt, “Still before Sexuality,” 25–26.

²⁹ Banister, “*ὁμοίως*,” 589.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 588–89.

³¹ Swancutt, “Disease of Effemination,” 207–8 (emphasis added).

³² Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (CRINT, Section 3: Jewish Traditions in Early Christian Literature 1; Minneapolis: Fortress; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 18–19.

female homogeneity.³³ Brooten proposes that female homogeneity was so monstrous that it was worse than male homogeneity and so deserved both mention and priority.³⁴ Jewett instead notes Paul's "strikingly egalitarian" perspective that he would mention it at all.³⁵ However, with a heterogenital reading the reference seems less striking, since the more common discourse about male–female *παρὰ φύσιν* sex becomes the logically prioritized clause. Regarding *θήλειαι ἀνθρώπων* ("their females")³⁶ who were engaging in sex *παρὰ φύσιν*, Jewett notes the "chauvinism or procreational preoccupation" in the possessive form of this phrase.³⁷ Gwen Saylor believes that the possessive refers to the "wives and daughters of Gentile men." Since she assumes the traditional homogenital reading of v. 26b, she does not draw the intuitive conclusion that the women are simply asking their men to perform *παρὰ φύσιν* sex on them.³⁸

If this passage about sexual deviance is targeting idol worship rather than sex itself, it would not be anomalous. The association between idolatry and sex was common in early Jewish and Christian sources.³⁹ The OT has specific references to male temple prostitutes in conjunction with non-Israelite worship (see below). In the Wisdom of Solomon (14:12–31), as in the *Apocalypse of Peter* above, we find statements similar to those made by Paul in Romans 1. In this literary context, Paul's words, I argue, would have starkly drawn the first-century mind to the goddess religions.⁴⁰

II. PAUL VERSUS THE GODDESS

The religion of the great mother goddess (*Magna Mater*) is one of the oldest recorded religions, dating to at least 6000 B.C.E. A terra-cotta figurine from this

³³ See Bradley Artson, "Judaism and Homosexuality," *Tikkun* 3 (1988): 52–54, 92–93; Michael Satlow, "'They Abused Him like a Woman': Homoeroticism, Gender Blurring and the Rabbis in Late Antiquity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 1–25, here 15–17.

³⁴ Brooten, *Love*, 240.

³⁵ Jewett, *Romans*, 176.

³⁶ TLG-E (2000) contains twenty-six results from a search of "θήλει ἀνθρώπων" (accessed April 15, 2010). Fifteen of these are quotations from or commentaries on Romans. Only one of these differs enough to merit analysis in this context, and this passage, from Didymus's *Commentary on Zechariah*, is described above. The rest are found in treatises on animals, where the phrase refers to the females of the species. Six of these are in Aristotle, who, like Paul, mentions the females first, followed by the males, although I make no claim that Paul makes direct use of Aristotle. The fact that all of the references not pertaining to Romans are zoological in nature, comparing how the males and females procreate, may lend further support to the procreationist interpretation of *παρὰ φύσιν*.

³⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 177.

³⁸ Saylor, "Beyond the Biblical Impasse," *Dialog* 44 (2005): 81–89, here 84.

³⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 113.

⁴⁰ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 106.

era, found at Catal Huyuk, shows the Mother sitting on her throne between two large cats.⁴¹ This religion was in Asia Minor by at least the seventh century B.C.E.,⁴² in Greece by the fifth or early fourth century,⁴³ and its official entry into Rome was in 204 B.C.E.⁴⁴ According to tradition, the Sibylline books instructed the Roman government to bring the “Mother of Mount Ida” to Rome to defeat Hannibal.⁴⁵ A minor earthquake convinced King Attalus to release the goddess to them (in the form of a small meteorite),⁴⁶ and Cybele’s temple on Palatine Hill was completed in 191 B.C.E.⁴⁷

The importance of the goddess religions cannot be overestimated.⁴⁸ During Paul’s missionary travels, goddess practices were widespread, and A. T. Fear notes that while “mystery religions in general were not a focus of Christian polemic, Attis and Cybele on the other hand appear to have been a favorite target for the invective of Christian writers.”⁴⁹ Temples dedicated to Cybele/Attis, Artemis, Aphrodite, Demeter, and Venus were in most large cities of the region. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was claimed to be the largest building in the world and one of the Seven Wonders.⁵⁰ Strabo (somewhat dubiously) claimed that the temple to Aphrodite in Corinth had more than one thousand temple prostitutes and that it was this business that made Ephesus prosperous (*Geogr.* 8.6.20).⁵¹ In Rome, the

⁴¹ Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (Ancient World; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 28; Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), 15.

⁴² Patricia A. Johnston, “Cybele and Her Companions on the Northern Littoral of the Black Sea,” in *Cybele, Attis and Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M. J. Vermaseren* (ed. Eugene N. Lane; Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 131; Leiden/New York: Brill, 1996), 101–16, here 101; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 20.

⁴³ Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, *Soteriology and Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Cybele and Attis* (EPRO 103; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 64; Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 83; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 32.

⁴⁴ Eva Stehle, “Venus Cybele and the Sabine Women: The Roman Construction of Female Sexuality,” *Helios* 16 (1989): 143–64, here 153; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 41.

⁴⁵ Livy, *The History of Rome* (trans. George Baker; 6 vols.; New York: Harper & Bros., 1836), 317 (24.10); Ovid, *Fasti* (trans. A. J. Boyle and R. D. Woodard; New York: Penguin, 2000), 87–92 (4.179–372).

⁴⁶ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 39, 177; Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (Religion in the First Christian Centuries; New York: Routledge, 1996), 119.

⁴⁷ Turcan, *Cults*, 37; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 41.

⁴⁸ See Timothy Pettipiece, “From Cybele to Christ: Christianity and the Transformation of Late Roman Religious Culture,” *SJ 37* (2008): 41–61.

⁴⁹ Fear, “Cybele and Christ,” in Lane, *Cybele, Attis and Related Cults*, 37–50, here 37.

⁵⁰ See Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 100.

⁵¹ *The Geography of Strabo* (trans. Horace Leonard Jones; 8 vols.; LCL; London: Heinemann, 1917–33).

temples to Cybele and Aphrodite were built in the heart of the city on two of the Seven Hills, and Cybele's image was printed on Roman coins.⁵² Two major city festivals (the Day of Blood and the *Megalensia*) were organized around Cybele, and a statue of Cybele presided over the public games.⁵³ Lynn E. Roller describes the worship of Cybele as central to Roman life:

By the first century C.E., the Magna Mater was thus a divinity with a central place in Roman life. And the place of honor created for her cult in the first two centuries of its existence in Rome continued under the early Empire. The prominence of the Magna Mater in literature, art, and practice speaks of a cult that lay at the very center of the Roman religious experience. Her temple was located in the heart of the city, near its most venerable shrines.⁵⁴

Hermaphrodite Goddesses and Queer Priests

There are similarities in the practices among the goddess cults,⁵⁵ as well as a popular blending of goddess identities, as described by Apuleius (second century C.E.):

Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me. The primeval Phrygians call me Pessinuntica, Mother of the gods; the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Artemis; for the islanders of Cyprus I am Paphian Aphrodite; for the archers of Crete I am Dictynna; for the trilingual Sicilians, Stygian Proserpine; and for the Eleusians their ancient Mother of the Corn. Some know me as Juno, some as Bellona of the Battles; others as Hecate, others again as Rhamnubia, but both races of Aethiopians, whose lands the morning sun first shines upon, and the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning and worship me with ceremonies proper to my godhead, call me by my true name, namely, Queen Isis.⁵⁶

⁵² Stehle, "Venus Cybele and the Sabine Women," 143.

⁵³ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 96.

⁵⁴ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 315–16.

⁵⁵ Gasparro, *Soteriology*, 40; David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 98; Catherine Kroeger, "The Apostle Paul and the Greco-Roman Cults of Women," *JETS* 30 (1987): 25–38, here 37; M. Renee Salzman, "Magna Mater: Great Mother of the Roman Empire," in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (ed. Carl Olson; New York: Crossroad, 1983), 60–67, here 60; William Blake Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 86.

⁵⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (trans. Robert Graves; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1951), 264–65.

Venus was brought to Rome shortly before Cybele, and Macrobius describes Aphrodite/Venus as hermaphroditic:

Moreover, there is in Cyprus a bearded statue of the goddess with female clothing but with male attributes, so that it would seem that the deity is both male and female. Aristophanes also calls her “Aphroditus”; and in Laevinus the descriptive adjective is in the masculine gender, when he says: “Therefore worshipping Venus the giver of life [*almum*], whether the deity is female or male—even as is the life-giving deity that shines by night.” Philochorus, too, in his *Attis* says that Venus is the moon and that men offer sacrifice to the moon dressed as women, and women dressed as men, because the moon is thought to be both male and female.⁵⁷

Artemis is another goddess with similarities to Cybele.⁵⁸ Acts 19 describes the economic, political, and social power of Artemis in Ephesus, where Paul’s evangelizing starts a riot and a city leader exclaims, “Men of Ephesus, does not all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?” (Acts 19:35). Like Cybele’s priests, Artemis’s priests were frequently eunuchs, described as effeminate, and were sexually penetrated, violating the strict patriarchal ideals of masculinity in early Rome.⁵⁹ These were common practices for goddess priests throughout the ancient world.

The historical connection between the goddess religions and gender-variant priests goes back at least as far as the Sumerians in the third millennium B.C.E.,⁶⁰ appearing in temple records as the *gala/kalu* priest in relation to the goddess Innana. Anal sex in their rituals seems clear from the following epithet: “When the *gala/kalu* wiped his anus [he said], ‘I must not excite that which belongs to my lady Innana.’”⁶¹ Likely not coincidence, the word sign for *gala* is the combined signs for penis + anus.

The goddess Innana in later cultures was called Ishtar, notoriously promiscu-

⁵⁷ Macrobius, *The Saturnalia* (trans. Percival Vaughan Davies; New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 214 (3.8.2–3).

⁵⁸ Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11–15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 188; Turcan, *Cults*, 28; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 30. Rick Strelan makes the case that, by the time of the early Christians, the connections between Cybele and Artemis were “difficult to trace” (*Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* [BZAW 80; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1996], 90–91). However, the similarity in cross-gender practices was enough to create cultural revulsion, which is the imagery Paul uses in Romans 1.

⁵⁹ Kroeger, “Apostle Paul,” 37; Will Roscoe, “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion,” *HR* 35 (1996): 195–230, here 217; Tyrrell, *Amazons*, 86.

⁶⁰ Roscoe, “Priests,” 213.

⁶¹ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 33; Roscoe, “Priests,” 214.

ous and at times engaging in transvestitism.⁶² Ishtar similarly demands gender-variant priests—*assinu* (male), *assinitum* (female),⁶³ *kurgurrutu*,⁶⁴ or *galatur*.⁶⁵ The *assinu* were castrated so that Ishtar could “show her mighty power,” by changing the priests’ gender forever.⁶⁶ Further, the *assinu* engaged in cross-gender behaviors and had sexual roles in worship.⁶⁷ Will Roscoe notes that “Akkadian omen texts instruct men to have intercourse with *assinu* to obtain luck and refers to the desire of *assinu* for intercourse with men.”⁶⁸ The *assinitu* were discussed in the context of Ishtar’s female priests (*harimtu*, *kezertu*, *sekretu*, *samhatu*), who were expected to engage in anal sex with worshipers.⁶⁹

During the second and early first millennia B.C.E. sacred sex practices were not uncommon in the cultures surrounding Israel. There are several references to ritualized sex in the OT, specifically, the male “holy ones” or “male temple prostitutes” (Deut 23:17; 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7; Job 36:4; Hos 4:14). Deuteronomy 23:17-18 reads: “None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute. You shall not bring the hire of a dog into the house of the LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God” (NASB). The term for “dog” (כלב) was commonly used by outsiders as a pejorative designation for the castrated male priests. In Neo-Babylonian the priests were often named using a compound of *kalbu* and the god: Kalbi-Sin, Kalbi-Šamaš, Kalbi-Marduk.⁷⁰ The *assinu* mentioned above, “joins the [Sumerogram] symbols for ‘dog’ and ‘woman.’”⁷¹ “Dog” (κυνάς) continued into the Greco-Roman era as slang for Cybele’s priests, whom Paul mentions in Phil 3:2–3, including a reference to their castration.⁷²

Multiple texts describe the cross-dressing and effeminate goddess priests,⁷³ as well as the annual festivals of the galli. Initially the Romans had difficulty accept-

⁶² Roscoe, “Priests,” 219.

⁶³ Greenberg, *Construction*, 97.

⁶⁴ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 30.

⁶⁵ Philippe Borgeaud, *Mother of the Gods: From Cybele to the Virgin Mary* (trans. Lysa Hochroth; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 48.

⁶⁶ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 31; D. Winton Thomas, “Kelebh ‘Dog’: Its Origin and Some Usages of It in the Old Testament,” *VT* 10 (1960): 410–27, here 426.

⁶⁷ Meir Malul, “אִישׁ עֵתִי (Leviticus 16:21): A Marginal Person,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 437–42; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 30.

⁶⁸ Roscoe, “Priests,” 217.

⁶⁹ Greenberg, *Construction*, 106; Donald V. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 60.

⁷⁰ Thomas, “Kelebh,” 425.

⁷¹ Greenberg, *Construction*, 95; Thomas, “Kelebh,” 426; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 41.

⁷² See Mark D. Nanos, “Paul’s Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles ‘Dogs’ (Philippians 3:2),” *BibInt* 17 (2009): 448–82, here 449, 475–76; Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 257–58.

⁷³ Martin, *Hellenistic*, 84.

ing the galli's gender violations, and thus the galli themselves. Roman citizens were prohibited from becoming galli until 101 B.C.E. when the laws were altered to allow certain citizens to become galli, and finally around 50 C.E., "Claudius removed all restrictions preventing citizens from becoming galli."⁷⁴ Eventually, the office of head of the galli, the *Archigallus*, became a state-appointed position,⁷⁵ and the galli's primary festival, the Day of Blood, was incorporated into the public religious calendar⁷⁶ along with Cybele's *Megalensia*, which then became a multi-week event.

The galli would wander in the streets in full cross-dress regalia: amulets, flowing robes, makeup, depilated bodies, and long hair dyed blond. They would dance in a Bacchic frenzy with tambourines and flutes, often with knives or swords, with which they would cut their arms, shedding blood to help them tell the fortunes of the people who would give them money.⁷⁷ These practices continued at least through the fourth century. Firmicus describes some of their beliefs, temple practices, and festivals:

Tell me, is air a divinity if it looks for a woman in a man, if its band of priests can minister to it only when they have feminized their faces, rubbed smooth their skin, and disgraced their manly sex by donning women's regalia? 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, acknowledging with superlative relish in filthiness the dishonor of their polluted bodies. They nurse their tresses and pretty them up woman-fashion; they dress in soft garments; they can hardly hold their head erect on their languid necks. Next, being thus divorced from 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, but whatever the nature of their bodies is, it tells a different story. (*Err. prof. rel.* 4.2)⁷⁸

Augustine's account is similar, also mentioning the galli's castration:

There are the rites of the Mother of the gods where the beautiful youth Attis, loved by her and castrated because of a woman's jealousy, is mourned by those

⁷⁴ Randy P. Conner, *Blossom of Bone: Reclaiming the Connections between Homoeroticism and the Sacred* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 102.

⁷⁵ Grant Showerman, *The Great Mother of the Gods* (1901; repr., Chicago: Argonaut, 1969), 51.

⁷⁶ Roscoe, "Priests," 201.

⁷⁷ Greenberg, *Construction*, 98; Kroeger and Kroeger, *I Suffer Not*, 94; Turcan, *Cults*, 37–41; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 97.

⁷⁸ Firmicus Maternus, *The Error of Pagan Religions* (trans. Clarence Forbes; ACW 37; New York: Newman, 1970), 50–51.

unfortunate men called Galli who are also castrated. . . . The rites which are enacted by castrated and effeminate men are indeed performed in secret; but our adversaries have certainly not been able to conceal the men themselves, so miserably emasculated and corrupted. (*Civ.* 6.7)⁷⁹

Several other Christian and non-Christian sources describe the roaming priests similarly.⁸⁰ In addition to the frenzied, effeminate behavior, other practices are consistent: castration, same-sex sex, and the presence of female galli, often paired with phalli and anal sex. Each of these deserves a separate treatment.

Castration and Male Homogenitality

The male priests of many goddess religions made themselves into eunuchs.⁸¹ Many sources describe the castrated galli as well as the “frenzy” associated with the castration ritual, attesting to the longevity and widespread knowledge of the practice.⁸² By the time of Lucian (second century C.E.), the rituals had long since become part of the official Roman religious calendar, occurring on the Day of Blood.

During these days they are made Galli. As the Galli sing and celebrate their orgies, frenzy falls on many of them and many who had come as mere spectators afterwards are found to have committed the great act. I will narrate what they do. Any young man who has resolved on this action, strips off his clothes, and with a loud shout bursts into the midst of the crowd, and picks up a sword from a number of swords which I suppose have been kept ready for many years for this purpose. He takes it and castrates himself and then runs wild through the city, bearing in his hands what he has cut off. He casts it into any house at will, and from this house he receives women’s raiment and ornaments. Thus they act during their ceremonies of castration. (Lucian, *Syr. d.* 61)

The act of self-castration helped the galli transcend gender. One faction of the Gnostic movement, the Naassenes, describes this idea, linking it to early Christian thought. The Naassenes, “while equally regarding the Logos [Jesus] as the centre of

⁷⁹ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* (ed. and trans. Robert H. Dyson; Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 254.

⁸⁰ See also Catullus 63 (*The Poetry of Catullus* [trans. Charles H. Sisson; New York: Orion, 1967], 103–6); Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.14 and *Paed.* 3.4 (*ANF* 2); Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.315–75 (*Satires* [trans. Rolfe Humphries; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958], 75); Lucian, *Syr. d.* 50–55 (*The Syrian Goddess* [trans. Herbert Strong; 1913; repr., London: BiblioBazaar, 2007]); Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.600–680 (trans. William Ellery Leonard; New York: Dover, 2004), 52.

⁸¹ Roller, *God the Mother*, 318.

⁸² See also Catullus 63; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.500; Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.600–680 (Leonard, 52).

their belief, held the equivalent deity to be Attis, and frequented the Phrygian Mysteries as the most direct source of spiritual enlightenment.”⁸³ Kroeger and Kroeger date this Christo-Naassene sect to the first century C.E. and link it and the transgender beliefs to the galli practices: “There is considerable evidence that the Naassene sect developed from that of Attis of Cybele.”⁸⁴

Hippolytus, a Christian apologist from the late second century, attacks the Naassenes and their gender-deviant beliefs. Such beliefs are described in the *Logia*, sayings the Gnostics claim are attributable to Jesus. The *Gospel of Thomas* describes the basis for the Naassene belief in the desirability of transcending gender: “when you make the male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female . . . then you will enter [the <Father’s> domain]” (brackets in the original) (logion 22).⁸⁵ It is this and other teachings that Hippolytus directly critiques, and in the process links the Cybele/Rhea and Attis religion to Romans 1:

For (the Naassene) says, there is the hermaphrodite man, . . . [and] 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 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. *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.* . . . For in these words which Paul has spoken they say the entire secret of theirs, and a hidden mystery of blessed pleasure, are comprised. (*Haer.* 5.2)⁸⁶

In Romans 1, what many contemporary Christians see as a condemnation of homosexuality the Naassenes saw as a blessing, as it helped them to transcend the profanity of gender and thus become closer to God. The Naassenes understood Rom 1:26b–27 as sacred sex, connected with the sexual practices of the galli. Equally important to the early Christian polemicists, the practice of self-castration was not limited to the Gnostic factions of Christianity but became an issue for many Christian men, who, in their attempts to dedicate themselves wholly to their faith,

⁸³ Jesse L. Weston *From Ritual to Romance* (1920; repr., Mineola: Dover, 1997), 158.

⁸⁴ Kroeger and Kroeger, *I Suffer Not*, 165–66.

⁸⁵ Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (New Testament Readings; New York: Routledge, 1997), 96.

⁸⁶ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* (ANF 5:49–50).

believed they must become “eunuchs because of the reign of the heavens” (Matt 19:12 YLT), drawing inspiration from the practices of the goddess religions and castrating themselves.⁸⁷

In addition to castration and transgender theology, several of the goddess religions made sex an integral part of their worship,⁸⁸ practices still seen today in the Indian Hijra system.⁸⁹ This practice is attested also in the OT as *qādēš* (“male shrine prostitutes” in 1 Kgs 15:12 and 2 Kgs 23:7 NIV). That the OT and NT recognize and condemn sacred sex is clear. That Greek and Roman society condemned sacred sex, even sacred homogeneity, is far from clear and is probably incorrect. In fact, it seems that ritualized sacred homoeroticism “experienced a kind of renaissance between the fourth century B.C.E. and the third century C.E.”⁹⁰ In this form of worship, it was believed that the worshiper “receives the inner-most essence and power of a god.”⁹¹ The galli, for their part in the homogenital act, live out the sexual/gender variance of Attis and Cybele as well as transcend gender, to become more like their gods.⁹²

That the galli participated in homogenital acts is indisputable, as seen in the *gala/kalu* above,⁹³ as well as in descriptions of the galli from Roman and Greek texts.⁹⁴ Apuleius tells an archetypal story of the galli, here describing a traveling band of priests of the goddess:

The eunuch, whose name was Philebus, led me off to his lodgings. When he reached the door he called out: “Look, girls, Look! I have brought you a lovely

⁸⁷ David Hester, “Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus,” *JSNT* 28 (2005): 13–40, here 30–36; Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 245–81.

⁸⁸ Greenberg, *Construction*, 99.

⁸⁹ The Indian *devadasi* system is the tradition whereby young girls are consecrated into temple service, often becoming involved in sex work. Hijra are emasculated or intersex men associated with both goddess worship and sex work. The similarities include castration, ostentatiously “effeminate” behaviors and dress, the public belief that Hijra and *devadasi* can bless and curse, the stigmatized nature of Hijra and *devadasi*, and the sexual use of these stigmatized individuals under the auspices of sacred sex practices. See Moni Nag, “Anthropological Perspectives on Prostitution and AIDS in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 36 (2001): 4025–30; John O’Neil, Treena Orchard, R. C. Swarankar, James Blanchard, Kaveri Gurav, and Stephen Moses Dhandha, “Dharma and Disease: Traditional Sex Work and HIV/AIDS in Rural India,” *Social Science and Medicine* 59 (2004): 851–60; Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Worlds of Desire; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Karuna Sharma, “The Social World of Prostitutes and *Devadasis*,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 9 (2007): 297–310; Rabun Taylor, “Two Pathic Subcultures in Ancient Rome,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1997): 319–71.

⁹⁰ Conner, *Blossom*, 116.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, 125.

⁹³ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 33; Roscoe, “Priests,” 214.

⁹⁴ See Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.14; Firmicus, *Err. prof. rel.* 4.2; Martial, *Epigrams* 3.81 (trans. Shackleton Bailey; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

new man-servant!” The girls were a set of disgusting young eunuch priests who broke into falsetto screams and hysterical giggles of joy, thinking that Philebus really meant what he said, and that they would now have a fine time with me. . . . This queer family included one real man, a great big slave, whom they had bought with money collected by begging. When they went out, leading the Goddess in procession, he would walk in front playing a horn—he played extremely well—and at home they used in him all sorts of ways, especially in bed.⁹⁵

Female Galli, Temple Prostitutes, and Phalli

In addition to the gender-variant males, female galli, *ἑταίρας* (temple prostitutes/slaves) and *sacerdos* (priestess) are also associated with the mother goddess.⁹⁶ M. J. Vermaseren notes that

many priestesses (*sacerdos*; *ἱερετεύουσα*) of the cult are known. Their choice, too, had to be sanctioned by the *quindecimviri*. The title of *sacerdos maxima*, which occurs in Rome, suggests a certain hierarchy. . . . They supervised the inferior members of the staff and they carried the sacred vessels (*cernophorae*), or acted as mourners (*praeficae*) during the days of mourning in March.⁹⁷

Sawyer concurs: “Women in particular would have enjoyed the freedom that such a religion offered them as an alternative to the rigid, patriarchal structures Roman society imposed on them.”⁹⁸ As already mentioned, *ἑταίρας* were associated with the temples of Aphrodite/Venus in Rome⁹⁹ and Artemis in Ephesus (Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.6.20). The rituals associated with these temples were often orgiastic, and “their votaries were women and eunuchs.”¹⁰⁰

Clement describes the practices of some female galli, pairing them with stereotyped images of the male galli:

And these women are carried about over the temples, sacrificing and practicing divination day by day, spending their time with fortune-tellers, and begging priests, and disreputable old women; and they keep up old wives’ whisperings over their cups, learning charms and incantations from soothsayers, to the ruin of the nuptial bonds. And some men they keep; by others they are kept; and others are promised them by the diviners. They know not that they are cheating themselves, and giving up themselves as a vessel of pleasure to those that wish to indulge in wantonness; and exchanging their purity for the foulest outrage, they

⁹⁵ Apuleius, *Golden Ass*, 188–89.

⁹⁶ Showerman, *Great Mother*, 54.

⁹⁷ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 109.

⁹⁸ Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, 125. See also Ross Shepard Kraemer, “Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysus,” *HTR* 72 (1979): 55–80; and Roller, *God the Mother*, 232.

⁹⁹ Stehle, “Venus Cybele and the Sabine Women,” 152.

¹⁰⁰ Tyrrell, *Amazons*, 86.

think what is the most shameful ruin a great stroke of business. And there are many ministers to this meretricious licentiousness. . . . But these women delight in intercourse with the effeminate [κίναιδων]. And crowds of abominable creatures flow in, of unbridled tongue, filthy in body, filthy in language; men enough for lewd offices, ministers of adultery, giggling and whispering. (*Paed.* 3.4 [ANF])¹⁰¹

Clement here describes a surprising practice: the women were having sex with the κίναιδοι. In a simplified sense, the κίναιδοι are effeminate men who enjoy being sexually penetrated.¹⁰² This raises the question of why a κίναιδος would go to a female to have sex, and what form that sex would take. Three possibilities emerge. First, these κίναιδοι may have been sexually penetrating the women, contrary to the meaning of the term κίναιδοι as well as the contextual inferences; this is unlikely. The second possibility is that the men were performing oral sex on the women, as referenced by Martial.¹⁰³ The third possibility is that the women were using an ἔλισσος (“phallus”) to perform anal sex on the men. Either of the latter two represents a dramatic gender reversal of cultural norms. If the male performs oral sex on the woman, such behavior would still put the male in the passive condition of *fellare*, and the woman in the active condition of *irrumare*.¹⁰⁴ Such a reversal would constitute a breach of expected gender roles for any respectable man and woman. If the woman uses an ἔλισσος or φαλλός to engage in *pedicare*, the man allows himself to be *cevare*. Either case would constitute behavior that was *παρὰ φύσιν*, since none involved procreative possibilities and each violated patriarchal norms of gender roles.

The latter interpretation of the behavior of temple *ἑταίρας* is supported by texts that associate the goddess temples with phalli. The goddess Diana was honored in the *kordax*, “a dance-drama in which women and men dressed in the garments of the opposite sex, the women, wearing *lombai*, ‘enormous phalli;’ pretended to penetrate the male dancers.”¹⁰⁵ Clement describes a φαλλός given to new galli initiates. Although he does not explicitly state the function of the φαλλός, it is not

¹⁰¹ Stählin, *Clemens*, 253: Αἱ δὲ ἀνδρογύνων συνουσίαις ἡδονταί, παρεισρέουσι δὲ ἔνδον κίναιδων ὄχλοι ἀθυρόγλωσσοι.

¹⁰² Or *cinaedi* in Latin. Williams (*Roman Homosexuality*, 194–97) cites several ancient writers who refer to galli as *cinaedi*. These may or may not have been the male galli. While most galli were κίναιδοι, it cannot similarly be concluded that most κίναιδοι were galli, since there is no evidence to suggest that most men who engaged in homogeneity were Cybele priests.

¹⁰³ Martial, *Epigrams* 3.81 (LCL): “What concern have you, eunuch Baeticus, with the feminine abyss? This tongue of yours should be licking male middles. Why was your cock cut off with a Samian shard if you were so fond of cunt, Baeticus? Your head should be castrated. You may be a eunuch loinwise, but you cheat Cybele’s rites. With your mouth you’re a man.”

¹⁰⁴ Using the Latin, based on Williams’s treatment of the subject (*Roman Homosexuality*, 202).

¹⁰⁵ Conner, *Blossom*, 96.

unreasonable to assume, in light of other texts and the rites of the *gala/kalu*, that the early Christians believed sex *παρὰ φύσιν* was occurring:

Of members so lewd a worthy fruit—Aphrodite—is born. In the rites which celebrate this enjoyment of the sea, as a symbol of her birth a lump of salt and the phallus (*φαλλός*) are handed to those who are initiated into the art of uncleanness.¹⁰⁶

III. CONCLUSION

That Paul would have been familiar with the goddess religions seems inescapable. Temples and shrines to Cybele, Artemis, Venus/Aphrodite, Astarte, and others were scattered densely around the region of Paul's upbringing and missionary travels.¹⁰⁷ In Corinth, where Paul most likely wrote Romans,¹⁰⁸ several gender/sexual-variant artifacts have been found. The anti-Christian riot in Ephesus (Acts 19) was important enough to be preserved in the canon, and evidence suggests that other conflicts between the goddess cults and early Christian groups occurred, not to mention Paul's reference to the *galli* (*κυνάξ*) in Phil 2:2–3. Roscoe goes so far as to say, "In some cities, worshipers clashed in the streets when the festivals of the two religions coincided, as they often did in the spring."¹⁰⁹ This should not be surprising, given the popularity and influence of the goddess religions on the Greek and Roman cultures. Roller notes the extent of the *galli*'s presence in Rome:

In contrast, the evidence suggests that eunuch priests were a common sight in Rome. The prominence of these priests in Roman society may have resulted from the secure position given to eunuchs by the Magna Mater cult. Such a protected status could have caused their number to multiply, as the priesthood proved a magnet for transsexuals, transvestites, and others who found themselves on the margins of society. . . . This may well have caused their numbers to grow to the point where they became quite a conspicuous part of the social scene.¹¹⁰

Given the spread of castration rituals into the Christian community, likely linked directly to the goddess cults, it seems that theologically there would be heavy inter-

¹⁰⁶ Clement, *Protr* 2.14 (*ANF*). The Greek *φαλλός* is from Stählin, *Clemens*, 12. See also Arnobius, *The Case against the Pagans* 5.19 (trans. George E. McCracken; 2 vols.; ACW 7–8; Westminster, MD: Newman, 1949), 2:427. A similar text by Arnobius refers to the exchange of "obscene tokens" referring to the Latin *phallos* as found in *Arnobii Adversus Nationes libri VII* (ed. August Riefferscheid; CSEL 4; Vienna: Geroldi Filium Bibliopolam, 1875), 7.190.

¹⁰⁷ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 37. For an exhaustive description of the extant artifacts representing Cybele and Attis, see idem, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque* (CCCA) (EPRO 50; Leiden: Brill, 1966–86).

¹⁰⁸ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 110; Jewett, *Romans*, 18.

¹⁰⁹ Roscoe, "Priests," 205.

¹¹⁰ Roller, *God the Mother*, 319.

nal interest in discrediting goddess beliefs and practices, in addition to the political and social conflict.¹¹¹

The cumulative evidence suggests that Paul's context for the entire pericope of Rom 1:18–32 is idolatry, and that vv. 26–27 refer to the gender and sex-variant practices of the goddess cults. Further, considering that at least six sources from the early church imply or state that v. 26b is a reference to heterogeneity, it seems that the tradition linking this verse to “lesbians” is dubious, thus problematizing the idea that in vv. 26–27, Paul is describing the “category of homosexuality.” There is little reason to believe that Paul's intent in this passage is anything but an exhortation against the worship of other gods, and even less basis to infer the general content of Paul's beliefs about sexual orientations, specifically the use of this passage as a condemnation of contemporary queer relationships.

¹¹¹ Hester, *Eunuchs*, 30–36; Kuefler *Manly Eunuch*, 264.

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