

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

Journal Article Critique of
Townsley, Jeramy. "Paul, the Goddess Religions and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28." *Journal of
Biblical Literature*, Vol 130.4 (2011): 707-728.

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Systematic Theology I

by

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Introduction

This paper will perform a journal critique of “Paul, the Goddess Religions and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28” by Jeramy Townsley. The focus is to determine whether the writer has drawn out the true meaning of the biblical text or imposed his own viewpoints.

This critique will briefly summarize the journal entry. Referencing scripture and external academic resources, it will then critically interact with the text and recapitulate.

Brief Summary

Townsley expressly chose this passage because it is one of the primary New Testament texts used to condemn both male and female homosexuals. He strives to prove that the condemnation of sin in the text cannot be applied to “contemporary queer relationships.”¹

Primary points are as follows: (1) The perpetrators of 1:23-28 cannot be compared with today’s “gay”, “lesbian” and “straight” identities. (2) The acts in 1:26b refer to heterosexuals having types of sex that cannot lead to procreation. (3) Females referenced in 1:26 and males in 1:27 refer to their action (exchange of natural behaviors), not their identities. (4) Natural vs. unnatural behaviors (*παρὰ φύσιν*) likely refers to “nonprocreative sex (or perhaps an inversion of patriarchal gender norms).” (5) Structurally and rhetorically, the passage would seem strange to be followed by “a more minor list of sins that includes, for example, murder (Rom 1:29).” (6) Goddess sects whose cross-gender and sexual practices violated patriarchal norms grew during this era. “Paul surely was well-aware of these practices.”²

¹ Jeramy Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol 130.4 (2011): 728.

² Jeramy Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23-28,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol 130.4 (2011): 708.

Critical Interaction

Townsley's bias is that contemporary homosexuality is not sin. Rejecting the doctrines of creation and sin (Gen 1-3; Rom 3:23, 6:23; Jer 17:9), he believes in "gay" and "lesbian" identities. His goal is to normalize homosexuality. The author's approach is highly postmodern. Adhering to the conditioned nature of knowledge, he relies heavily on cultural perspective and believes that truth is relative. Townsley's process of doing theology seems to have fallen short in the collection of the biblical materials.³ Scripture interprets scripture. R. E. O. White defines homosexuality as, "Sexual desire directed toward members of one's own sex," and reminds that acting on said desires is consistently condemned as sin throughout the canon of scripture. (Lev 18:22, 20:13, 23:18; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Tim 1:10; Jude 7)⁴

Cross-referencing ancient writings, Townsley details extreme sex and body mutilation customary within goddess cult sects. Insisting that only this level of depravity is condemned, he struggles to reidentify the subjects of v.26-27. Townsley denies that relations mirroring "contemporary queer relationships" existed in these first century cultures. Preston Sprinkle cites ancient writings to detail many Greco-Roman examples of today's brand of homosexuality. In Greece, "Agathon was by all modern standards gay, and he had a life-long lover of equal age and status named Pausanias (Plato, Sym. 193B; cf. Aelian, Var. hist. 2.21). In Rome, there was "the well-known example of Nero, who on two occasions publicly married other men."⁵

The article's apparent weakness, if overlooked, actually serves to strengthen his argument. He fails to define the practices of the modern gays and lesbians. What is the reader

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology. 3rd Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 27-66.

⁴ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. 2nd Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 575-576.

⁵ Preston Sprinkle, "Romans 1 and Homosexuality: A Critical View of James Brownson's Bible, Gender, Sexuality," *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 24.4 (2014): 526-527.

being encouraged to condone? The reader would be deemed judgmental to imagine anything less wholesome than a fully monogamous homosexual marriage that counterfeits God's design. There is also no mention of the transgender "identity", who by definition certainly mutilates his body today just the same as the goddess sects of the first century.

David Malick demonstrates that Paul uses terms from the "creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 rather than Hellenistic Judaism. Φυσικός and φύσις ("nature") refer to one's constitution as given by God the Creator." (2 Pet 2:12; Rom 2:27; Rom 11:21, 24)... In Romans 1:26 φυσικός means "in accordance with the intention of the Creator" and παρά φύσιν means "contrary to the intention of the Creator."... θήλειαι αὐτῶν and... οἱ ἀρσενες highlight the created order of male and female..." Jesus' teaching on divorce (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6) uses ἀρσην and θήλυς. In Gal 3:28, Paul "used these terms to define men and women as polar opposites... In Romans 1:26-27 Paul condemned homosexuality as a perversion of God's design for human sexual relations."⁶

Conclusion

The doctrine of homosexuality illustrated in Romans 1 applies to those who follow homosexual desires within all eras, people groups and cultures. The author's argument fails to stand against the infallible Word of God. Rather than "under"standing the passage, the author seeks to "over"stand it.⁷ Inversely, the reader is encouraged to submit to culture over Christ.

What are the standard practices of the contemporary gay? As a man who once practiced homosexuality and has since repented (1 Cor 6:9-11), I know the answer to that question. And I can imagine writing something similar in my past life for the purpose of justifying my own sin.

⁶ David E. Malick, "The Condemnation of Homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 150.599 (Sept 1993): 330-340.

⁷ Chad Thornhill, "Exegesis and Theology" (video lecture in THEO525-D01 LUO at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, June 18, 2018).

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