

Romans 1:18-2:16

The Argument, Historical Context and Interpretive Debate.

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Romans: The Steps of the Argument

1: 18-23 The wrath of God is revealed.

God known through creation, but not honored as God, minds darkened, idols created.

1:24-32 Therefore, God gave up to lusts, dishonorable passions, women for women, men for men, and all manner of other evil—envy, murder, strife, gossip, arrogance, heartlessness

2:1-11 Therefore, no excuse when we pass judgment on others, God's kindness is to lead us to repentance.

2:12-16 Those without the law perish without the law, those with will be judged with the law. Doers of the law will be justified. Gentiles without the law, do by nature what is in the law, have it witness in their hearts, conscience. God judges all.

Social and Philosophical Context

◆ Greek Marriage and Sexual Practices

Women relegated to the private home.

Friendship not expected in marriage.

Plato—*Symposium*, pederasty; *The*

Laws, homosexuality legislated against.

Aristotle—scientific, negative, ap-

proaches something like “orientation.”

◆ Jewish Reactions to Greek Sexual Practices

Genesis and Leviticus as command.

Negative—contra athletics in nude.

Wisdom, 13; Philo—Paul reflects.

◆ Roman Marriage and Sexual Practices

Patriarchal, some public role for women,

dominance, slave vs. free, homosexual

behavior tolerated & ridiculed. Some

love relationships, even marriage.

◆ Stoic Developments, 1st-2nd Century

Mutuality in marriage, friendship,

control of passion, procreation.

Romans in the Context of the Roman World

- ◆ What happens when we substitute the worship of something else for the worship of God? The order or creation, the “natural” is lost, corrupted. Minds darkened.
- ◆ Why idolatry? Hebrew, symbolic for substituting something for God. Roman gods false.
- ◆ Homosexual behavior, one of the multiple results of the idolatry—covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, arrogance, heartlessness, foolishness—listed first as graphic representation. “Echoes” of Genesis and Leviticus.
- ◆ God gives us over to our sin; our punishment is first our choices, our “distortion” of created or natural order and relationships. God leaves us to our choices and darkened minds.
- ◆ Conscience is in all; the law “is written on their hearts.” Sin corrupts this too.
- ◆ None are without excuse, neither Jew nor Gentile, but we all need “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (3:22). Jews condemned by Jewish arguments, Romans by Roman. Paul weaves both together, as did previous Jewish writers.
- ◆ The argument is not about homosexual practice in itself. It is an illustration in a complex argument based on the order of creation and scripture, and knowledge of each.
- ◆ Responds to a wide range of ancient sexual practice, bisexual and same-sex behavior.

Arguments about this passage in favor of homosexual behavior for Christians today

- ◆ The passage refers to Greek and Roman homosexual practice—pederasty, prostitution, dominance—not to current practice. Paul did not know of gay, committed, monogamous relationships and so the passage does not apply directly (or indirectly?) to current practices and discussions.
- ◆ Paul uses an outmoded argument from natural law which is not recognized today as a valid form of argument.
- ◆ What is natural is how we are created, and some are created with same-sex attraction, which Paul did not know, therefore homosexual behavior is not sin. (A quasi-natural law argument?)
- ◆ Jesus calls us to freedom from dominance in the web of corrupt structures of a sinful world. Among these are false bondage to the world's constructions of gender identity. Jesus frees us to be us, including our attractions and loves.
- ◆ Traditional scriptural teaching contributes to the persecution of those with homosexual orientation and so that interpretation must be revised.

Response to the arguments

- ◆ Paul knew the range of sexual practice in the Roman world, including instances of homosexual marriage. He refers to homosexual practice in general, with sophistication as a well educated Jew in touch with the major, and best intellectual movements of the Late Hellenistic/Roman world.
- ◆ Arguments from the order of creation, or natural law are current in theological, philosophical and legal debates (e.g. *Supr Crt*, Princeton, Oxford).
- ◆ The standard interpretation (something like the prior page) has been shared from ancient Israel, through the words of Jesus and Paul, through the early church and into the current day. Should recent theories of sexual identity take precedence?
- ◆ Jesus frees us from captivity to our own willfulness and sin ingrained through habitual practice, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and our obedience. We are called to withstand the world's entrapments, and our own questionable desires.
- ◆ Jesus, and our experience of his grace, might move us to know and love those who engage in same-sex practice as he does all of his children, and as he did those who practiced other sexual sins.

Sources for the above and further reading:

- ◆ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago University Press, 1980; argues that scripture does not address current homosexual practice; has not held up well.
- ◆ Brendan Byrne, S.J. *Romans*, Liturgical Press, 1996; good on Jewish and Roman thinking.
- ◆ Eva Cantarella, *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, 2nd. Ed. Yale, 2002. Up to date on Greece and Rome.
- ◆ Robert A. J. Gagnon, "Scriptural Perspectives on Homosexuality and Sexual Identity," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 24(2005): 293-303; scripture/theology on sexuality and discipleship with advice for counselors.
- ◆ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Harper/Collins, 1996; thorough and sensitive.
- ◆ Martti Nissinen, *Homoerotism in the Biblical World, a Historical Perspective*, Fortress Press, 1998; includes Roman practices; while positive on gay practice, contradicts Boswell.
- ◆ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Fortress, 2007; graphic literal translation, detailed and rigorous commentary.
- ◆ Gilbert Meilaender, "The First of Institutions," *Pro Ecclesia*, 6(1997); scripture and tradition on sexuality.
- ◆ Christopher Seitz, "Sexuality and Scripture's Plain Sense: The Christian Community and the Law of God," *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, ed. D.L. Balch, Eerdmans, 2000; a canonical approach.
- ◆ Mark D. Smith, "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1: 26-27," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 64(1996): 223-256; crisp analysis of Roman sexual practice which Paul might have known.
- ◆ John E. Toews, *Romans*, Herald Press, 2004; MBBS professor; clear and readable.
- ◆ Paul Veyne, *The Roman Empire*, Harvard University Press, 1987; from the series "A History of Private Life".