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# REVISITING HOMOSEXUALITY AND PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS: EXEGETICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF 1:18-32

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***Abstract:** Romans 1:18-32 is arguably one of the most cited biblical arguments against homosexuality. This article seeks to give a context from which to better understand Paul's admonition, by reexamining some of the exegetical and hermeneutical considerations, and their use in contemporary dialectic. After reviewing various perspectives and interpretations of Romans 1:18-32, a concluding segment argues that the dialectic should be reconsidered within an appropriate ethical framework.*

## **Romans 1:18-32<sup>†</sup>**

<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,

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<sup>†</sup> Biblical references in this article are from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version).

\* Instead of the ptc. epigontes, MSS D\*, G, and Latin versions read instead ouk enoesan, "they did not know," which changes the meaning of the verse considerably.

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.

**Romans 1:18-32: God's Judgment on the Ungodly**

The letter to the *Romans* is one of many attributed to Paul in the New Testament canon, which were written to different Christian congregations circa 50 CE. In it, he addresses particular concerns of the congregation in Rome. The portion of the text concerned with here, Romans 1:18-32, comes immediately after Paul's self-affirmation of his apostleship, his salutation to the Christian congregation in Rome, and a brief proclamation of salvation to all those who have faith in the gospel. The text in question is primarily delineated by a transition in subjects that focuses on characteristics of the "wicked" and "ungodly," which includes idolatry and homosexual practices, and a long list of other vices. In contrast, the preceding text deals with the righteousness of God as revealed by faith in the gospel, and the preceding text warns against condemning one's self by passing judgment on others. Specifically, Romans 1:18-32 discusses the wrath of God from heaven on the ungodly and wicked who suppress the truth, as well as some descriptive characteristics of who the wicked and unrighteous are, what they do, how God has "given them up" to their degrading minds and passions, and that they deserve to die.

To give a brief context, the remaining text of *Romans* discusses various concerns including: the righteous judgment of God, the Jews and the law, and that no one is righteous (2:1-3:20); the

righteousness of faith, the example of Abraham, and God's promise and the justification of faith (3:21-5:11); the relationship of Adam and Christ, dying and rising with Christ, and being slaves of righteousness (5:12-6:23); the law and sin, the inner conflict, life in the spirit, the future glory, and God's love through Jesus Christ (7:1-8:39); God's election of Israel, God's wrath and mercy, and Israel's unbelief (9:1-10:4); that salvation is for all, that Israel's rejection is not final, and that all Israel will be saved—including the salvation of the gentiles (10:5-11:36); the new life in Christ, and that the marks of the true Christian include being subject to authorities and loving one another (12:1-13:10); that the time is nigh, not to judge another and make another stumble, and that one should please others and not one's self (13:11-15:13); and some concluding instructions, personal salutations, and intentions on visiting the congregation (15:14-16:27).

Upon inspection, specific words are used throughout Romans 1:18-32 that connote an action in space such as *up* (4x) and *in* (4x); a directional relation between things, such as *from* (1x); states of being such as *invisible* (1x), *same* (1x), *filled* (1x), and also *full* (1x); and places are also referred to such as *heaven* (1x) and *creation* (1x). Most spatial references are metaphorical, and the references to heaven and creation underscore how Paul understood these concepts by drawing from Jewish traditions. Regarding tenses, the verses flow back and forth between the present and the past, with a noticeable emphasis on the past in verses 22-26, and a

concluding emphasis on the present for verses 30-32.

Given the heavy use of the words *God*, and the pronouns *their* and *they*, the primary actors in the text are God and the wicked. Although distant and supernatural, God is an active creator character, and heaven is also characterized in action as revealing the “wrath of God” (v. 18). God gives up the wicked to their “degrading passions,” “debase minds” and to “things that should not be done” (v. 24, 26, 28). Although the characters are flattened, the wicked and ungodly are the most highly developed actors in the text. They are described as “suppressing the truth” and “without excuse” (v. 18, 20); not honoring or giving thanks to God, “futile,” “senseless,” “and darkened” (v. 21); claiming to be wise, but really fools (v. 22); “exchanging the glory of God for images” (v. 23); lustful, impure, and degrading (v. 24); exchanging the truth about God for a lie, and worshiping and serving creatures rather than God (v. 25); exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural (v. 26-27); shameless, erroneous, and not acknowledging God (v. 27-28); filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit and craftiness (v. 29); gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents (v. 29-30); foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless (v. 31); knowing that they deserve to die and yet applauding the practice of wickedness by others (v. 32). The text emphasizes characteristics that evoke charged images such as the wrath of God from heaven and the wicked suppressing truth (v. 18); the creation of the world and God's eternal power, divine nature, glory and immortality (v. 20); images and idols

resembling humans, birds, four-footed animals or reptiles (v. 23); and God “giving up” the wicked to their vices (v. 24, 26, 28).

While the main structure of the writing is in letter format, the complicated polemics make the text more of a homily. The author does not attempt to convince or convict, but rather reaffirms what the intended audience already perceives about the wicked and ungodly. There is also a connection to the past by drawing from Jewish traditions, which highlight the creation of the world and God's power, as well as an apocalyptic sense of the wrath of God against the wicked (v. 18-20). In particular, one finds the use of polemical allusions, which characterize the wicked by alluding to Israelite stories revolving around idolatry and the cyclical pattern of turning from God, as well as the Deuterocanonical laws in Leviticus. It is likely that the intended audience is aware of Jewish traditions and it seems to be further implied that the wicked are too (v. 21, 32). However, the Hellenic perspective of the author also emerges in verses 22-23 when they suggest that they know who is wise and who is a fool, which points to the widespread cultural conception of *gnosis* in the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>

The author uses a poetic repetition of the key phrase “giving up” in verses 24, 26, 27, and 28. Additionally, the word “exchanged” is rhythmically repeated three times in verses 23, 25, and 26. There is also a marked connection between idolatry, physical impurity and wickedness. Furthermore, Paul does not distinguish exactly who the wicked are by giving specific and overt references; rather, the wicked are distinguished by

<sup>1</sup> *Gnosis* is defined here as a special salvific knowledge held by an elite group.

their actions. While the wicked are the most developed characters in the text, they remain generalized, one-dimensional and flattened. In the narrative dialogue, it is implied that the wicked are external “others,” separate from the righteous community to whom the text is intended.

### *Historical and Exegetical Criticisms of Romans*

Scholarly investigation dates *Romans* to circa 56-58 CE; however, form and genre criticism show that the letter was current in several textual forms as early as the second century. The most significant variation lies with the text as a whole. Disregarding minor variations, there are three primary versions of the text. Each version is distinguishable by length—one consists of fourteen chapters, one of fifteen chapters, and one in sixteen chapters. It is argued that the Roman form of the letter must be preserved in the fifteen and sixteen chapter versions, since all explicit reference to Rome is absent from the fourteen chapter version through the omission of the specific address (1:7; 1:15) and of chapter fifteen.<sup>2</sup>

According to Harry Gamble, the only viable option on the question of integrity is between the fifteen and sixteen-chapter forms, the fundamental problem being whether chapter sixteen belonged with Paul's letter to Rome.<sup>3</sup> There are features of the content of chapter sixteen that suggest an incongruity with the Roman address. Gamble argues that the letter was originally addressed to another community, likely in Ephesus. He explains that:

The major internal argument against the Roman address is derived from the greetings of 16:3-16 and relates (a) generally to the extent of the greetings, and (b) more particularly to the persons greeted and the ways in which they are characterized [...] That Paul, who had never visited Rome, could have known so many Roman Christians must appear highly unlikely, if not altogether impossible, and requires some explanation. It would be much more natural to locate so many acquaintances in a community well known to Paul.<sup>4</sup>

Notable in the greetings are Prisca and Aquila (16:3-4), whom Paul first encountered in Corinth (Acts 18:2), and with whom he had worked closely with before moving together to Ephesus. They were still in Ephesus at the writing of 1 Corinthians (16:19), in which Paul refers to a church in their house, which suggests a permanent residence. Finally, in 2 Timothy, purportedly directed to an Ephesus location *and* attributed to Paul sometime after the writing of *Romans*, greetings are sent to Prisca and Aquila.<sup>5</sup> Although no geographical notices are linked to other names, the personalized nuances suggest that Paul is personally acquainted with those greeted (16:5b-15). Gamble admits that the fact that Paul had not visited the Roman community in no way excludes the possibility that he had acquaintances in the congregation. Furthermore, that Paul possessed some knowledge about the Roman community is hard to dispute, and it would be strange that along with the notices he received he gained no information of individuals in the community.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Harry Gamble, Jr., *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans: A Study in Textual and Literary Criticism*, Studies and Documents 42 (ed. Irving Alan Parks; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1977), 127.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. See also Vincent P. Branick, *Understanding Paul and His Letters* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 335-36, 354-355.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

Gamble points out that the second major argument in what has come to be known as the “Ephesian Hypothesis” is drawn from the admonition against schismatics (16:17-20), which is thought to be unsuitable for Rome in terms of its tone and content.<sup>7</sup> He continues:

Throughout Rom 1-15 Paul maintains an irenic and solicitous posture, not stressing the apostolic authority which he invokes against problems of false teaching in letters to churches of his own founding. By comparison with the rest of the letter the tone of 16:17-20 appears to be unduly sharp and authoritarian [...] Conversely, both the tone and content of 16:17-20 can be regarded as appropriate to Ephesus. The existence there of false teaching is sometimes inferred from 1 and 2 Timothy, which mount a sustained defense against a schismatic tendency with affinities to that characterized in Rom 16, and also from the speech to the Ephesian elders in Miletus which Acts attributes to Paul (20:18-35).<sup>8</sup>

There are variations in the actual formulations of the Ephesian Hypothesis, the primary of which is that the correspondence is preserved in its entirety in Romans 16, and that its attachment to *Romans* was Paul's own work. It has been proposed that the letter sent to Rome is comprised of Romans 1-15, but at the same time a copy of the letter sent to Ephesus with the addition of chapter sixteen.<sup>9</sup>

The epistolary structure of *Romans* is hard to miss. According to Hans-Josef Klauck, the letter begins with one of the longest prescripts in antiquity, in which Paul addresses “all the Gentiles” (1:5-6) and

“To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (1:7).<sup>10</sup> The letter continues with a proem (1:8-15) consisting of a thanksgiving and a self-recommendation, and a thesis statement of God's righteousness (1:16-17) against the wickedness of the world's sinfulness (1:8-4:25). The letter continues with discussions on the life of faith (5:1-8:39) and the destiny of God's people (9:1-11:36), followed by general (12:1-13:14) and special (14:1-15:13) exhortations, and a recapitulation of important catchwords (15:7-13) that serves as the closing of the body. The letter closing is elaborate, and consists of travel plans (15:14-29), a prayer and peace wish (15:30-33), a recommendation (16:1-2), fifteen greetings (16:3-15), a request for the recipients to “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (16:1a), and an ecumenical greeting. The flow is interrupted in 16:17-19 (where some scholars suspect an interpolation) that warns against agitators, which is followed by a promise of deliverance by the God of peace and concluding grace benedictions (16:20).

It is impossible to detect a single type of genre that sufficiently covers all the intentions of the text. Luke Johnson argues five aspects that work to shape the genres and rhetoric in *Romans*.<sup>11</sup> The first is that *Romans* is a real letter. It is not simply an essay, but rather it is addressed to real people with a real purpose. Second, *Romans* is a scholastic diatribe. As such it offers a vivid, dialogical form of discourse, which addresses specific issues and presents rhetorical questions. *Romans* presents Paul more as a teacher than a

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Content and Exegesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 301-302.

<sup>11</sup> Luke Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2001), 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

preacher, and the use of the diatribe form also points to his Hellenic heritage. Johnson argues that recognizing the aspects of diatribe, particularly in the presentation of theses (as with 1:16-17) and antitheses (as with the text in question), is probably one of the most important keys in understanding the arguments in *Romans*. Third, *Romans* is a form of midrash. Paul's way of citing Jewish Scripture reveals his background in the interpretation of sacred texts within Judaism. For Paul and other Jewish-Christians, it is Jesus as the crucified and raised messiah that provides the key to interpreting Jewish Scripture. Fourth, *Romans* is a Christian writing. Paul shares with his readers not only understandings of the *Torah*, but also the "specific structures and symbols of the messianic movement."<sup>12</sup> Finally, *Romans* is a Pauline writing. There is overwhelming consensus that Paul authored this letter in terms of generating its vision and directing its arguments.

In addition to Johnson's list, the form of *Romans* also exhibits other genres. While Johnson argues in favor of a diatribe of moral instruction aimed not at theological preaching, but rather on shaping a certain moral and communal ethos,<sup>13</sup> there are undoubtedly theological arguments that are integral to Paul's letter. As such, *Romans* can be seen to contain a homily. Moreover, as a self-introduction to a community that he has not met, in preparation for his impending visit, it could also be argued that *Romans* is a brief manifesto, an apologetic self-defense of Paul's theology and preaching style. Indeed, Johnson concurs that *Romans* is "the most powerful argument concerning

God in the New Testament."<sup>14</sup> As an introduction, the text also exhibits elements of a diplomatic ambassadorial letter, most notably in the opening (1:1-15) and in the concluding recommendation and greetings (16:1-15).

In closer examination of 1:18-32, the form exhibits several characteristics that suggest that Paul is speaking in general terms about the state of humanity without the gospel. Verse 18 presents his topic sentence, and verse 32 his summary judgment. Joseph Fitzmyer points out that in verses 18-32 Paul speaks only of human beings, and never specifies Greeks or Gentiles; however, it is evident that he is talking about the totality of the pagan world of his day.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Paul uses heavy allusions to the creation narrative and incidents in Israel's history, and applies the ideas to the pagan world. However, it should be noted that the overall effect is to characterize human unrighteousness from a Jewish perspective. James Dunn points out a "threefold repetition" in verses 23, 25, and 26, which are matched by a second threefold repetition in 24, 26, 28; and further quotes a threefold development that appears in 19-23 (sin against the truth of God), 24-27 (sin against nature), and 28-32 (sin against others).<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the text in question, the most distinctive genres of verses 18-32 is as the antithesis of Paul's primary thesis in 1:16-17, and as a rhetorical trap, which is sprung in chapter 2. Vincent Branick echoes contemporary scholarship by stating that the whole message of *Romans* is contained in the summary of 1:16-17, in

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 270.

<sup>16</sup> James Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

which Paul announces the themes of salvation and justice.<sup>17</sup> With this opening, Paul refutes Jewish claims to exclusivity, as well as any Gentile sense of superiority over the Jews. Jews and Gentiles alike are the beneficiaries of “the good news.” Justice is linked to salvation through faith. The next passage, which is the primary concern here, is described by Johnson as the antithesis in a diatribal argument, which is used to “demonstrate the thesis by its contrary.”<sup>18</sup> In this case, the antithesis shows the opposite of the power of God for salvation, and the dark contrast of sin serves to make the light of the good news even brighter.

Alain Gignac notes that the theology and anthropology of 1:18-32 is nuanced and corrected by the proceeding text in chapter 2 and elsewhere in the letter.<sup>19</sup> He further states that, for a letter that espouses a universal greeting for all humanity, the text in question exhibits marked hierarchical dichotomies, that stem from a patriarchal logic—genres which appear only twice in all of *Romans* (also in 7:1-4). Beginning with a tribunal theme, the dichotomies include: heaven/[earth] (v. 18); God/humans (v. 18); Creator/creature (v. 25); incorruptible/corruptible (v. 23); truth (v. 18, 25)/lie (v. 25); wise (v. 20)/fool (v. 22); understood, knew, thinking (v. 20, 21, 23)/senseless, darkened (v. 21); natural/unnatural (v. 26); glory (v. 23)/shame (v. 24, 26, 27, 28); just (v. 32)/injustice (v. 18).<sup>20</sup>

It is widely regarded that the fourteen-chapter form of the text cannot be Paul's original letter; and it is further posited that the shorter fourteen-chapter version was a later attempt at catholicizing the letter, in order to make it relevant to others than the first recipients. Although the fourteen-chapter form of the text exerted a broad influence on the tradition, the need to present concluding elements later resulted in variant endings and differing placements of the doxology and benedictions; and because of the abruptness of ending *Romans* with a list of greetings, rather than grace benedictions, two alternative endings are attested in the manuscripts.<sup>21</sup>

Although no version of *Romans* exists without chapters 15 and 16, there is evidence in the textual tradition for a 14-chapter version.<sup>22</sup> In his commentary, Origen notes that Marcion drops the doxology and all that followed 14:23. Ancient *précis* also argue for a form of *Romans* having 1:1-14:23 + 16:25-27. Similar *capitula* from the sixth-century presuppose a text of *Romans* having 1:1-14:23 without the doxology. Furthermore, the *concordia epistularum paulinarum* found in some manuscripts of the Vulgate lists subject headings only from 1:1 to 14:23 and the doxology.<sup>23</sup> In addition, some Latin manuscripts designate the place from which the letter was sent as Athens, a reference that would not fit 16:1 if it were present.

A long-standing problem in the interpretation of *Romans* is the difficulty of stating with certainty its occasion and purpose. Unlike Paul's other letters, it is not all that clear in *Romans* that Paul is

<sup>17</sup> Branick, *Understanding Paul and His Letters*, 247-248.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Reading Romans*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Alain Gignac, “Résister au texte pour repenser les «genres»? Expérimentation herméneutique à partir de Romains 1,18-32,” *Lectio Difficilior* 2 (2002): 6-8, [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/02\\_2/gignac.pdf](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/02_2/gignac.pdf) (accessed April, 17 2010).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Gamble, *The Textual History*, 36, 128-30.

<sup>22</sup> Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Gamble, *The Textual History*, 18-19.

responding to the situation of the intended readers.<sup>24</sup> In speaking of the literary form of *Romans*, Dunn states that it is generally recognized that the introduction and conclusion are essentially variations on the familiar pattern of letter writing in the ancient world, which supports the impression that *Romans* was intended as a letter to a specific community.<sup>25</sup> However, he notes that the body of the letter is highly distinctive in content and character, resembling a treatise or literary dialogue. This tension has yet to be resolved, which underscores the uniqueness of the form Paul created. Dunn claims further that drawing parallels to other letters chiefly show how others wrote, which provides little prescription by which to assess Paul. In comparison, Klauck notes that typical letter components and expressions occur within the body of the text, which includes direct addresses and disclosure formulas, and question-and-answer exchanges reminiscent of the style of diatribe.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, all three of the traditional Aristotelian rhetorical genres are found in *Romans*, including judicial speech (which uses prosecuting or defensive language to convince; deliberative speech (which offers advice about an upcoming decision, favoring a particular opinion or warning against it); and demonstrative speech that entertains or praises.<sup>27</sup>

It is also remarkable how much *Romans* 1:18-32 resembles the *Wisdom of Solomon*. Written around 30 CE in Egypt, the *Wisdom of Solomon* represents the conflicting tensions between Jewish inhabitants and their Gentile neighbors. Everett Kalin notes that “[s]ome of the

key themes and specific turns of phrase in *Wisdom* 13-14 are so close to what Paul says in *Romans* 1:18-32 that we might even imagine him having that text before him (mentally if not physically) as he wrote.”<sup>28</sup> He observes that the reference to the idolatry of Gentiles and its consequences are commonplaces for both texts and their Jewish readers. Furthermore, both texts make a similar argument followed by a point they are trying to make. Both *Wisdom* and *Romans* state that the Gentiles fail to acknowledge God, worshipping instead false gods, and this idolatry is the source of their unrighteous behavior. However, there is a radical difference between the points they lead up to. For *Romans*, Jews and Gentiles are considered equal under God, but in *Wisdom* there is a marked distinction between God's treatment of Jews and Gentiles. The similarity in arguments, but marked contrast in the points they make, underscores Paul's struggle in establishing equitable relations between Jews and Gentiles within the Christian movement—which was particularly difficult with the Jews, given their circumstances, and whose covenant gave them a certain pride of place in the sight of God.<sup>29</sup>

It is widely recognized that Paul draws from a Hellenic-Jewish heritage. Dunn points out that Paul was a converted Pharisee who still carried many of his earlier concerns, and contends further that the suggestion that Paul abandoned his former identity for a new religiosity cuts off a proper exegesis of *Romans* and condemns interpretation to confusion and contradiction.<sup>30</sup> Paul did not see himself

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-33.

<sup>25</sup> Dunn, *Romans* 1-8, lix.

<sup>26</sup> Klauck, *Ancient Letters*, 303.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-213, 303.

<sup>28</sup> Everett Kalin, “Romans 1:26-27 and Homosexuality,” *CTM* 30.6 (2003): 426.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 426-429.

<sup>30</sup> Dunn, *Romans* 1-8, xli.

as moving from one religion to another, but rather as having “found the final expression and intent of the Jewish tradition.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Paul's missionary work aroused opposition from fellow Jews and Jewish-Christians alike. Dunn explains that Paul's work can be divided into two phases concerning the relationship with Jerusalem. In the first phase, Paul looks to the mother church in Jerusalem as a source of authority for his missionary work, but later as the relationship became strained, he became a more independent missionary. Yet he still tried to maintain a positive relationship with Jerusalem, and in the period before the writing of *Romans* it was Paul's priority to make a collection from the churches he had founded and to take it to Jerusalem as a mark of Gentile solidarity.<sup>32</sup> Dunn continues stating that

[a]n appreciation of this background is essential for an understanding of Paul's letter to Rome. The letter comes at what Paul clearly regards as the end of a major phase of his work (15:19,23), a phase greatly marked and marred by that hostility between Paul and an important strand of Jewish Christianity stemming from Jerusalem. The trip to Jerusalem to deliver the collection would be for Paul the fruit and seal of his success both in winning so many Gentiles to faith, but also in maintaining the unity of the whole Christian movement. Paul's hopes and fears on the matter are lucidly portrayed in the language of chapter 15: that his ministry in winning so many Gentiles would be acceptable to God (v16) and that their token of fellowship would be acceptable to the saints in Jerusalem (v31); but evidently he is more fearful regarding the latter than the former. It is

in this spirit of hope and fear that Paul writes his letter to Rome.<sup>33</sup>

It is evident that Paul had not been to Rome and did not know the community firsthand, and that his intent to visit is incidental to his mission in Spain—Paul intends on visiting Rome in passing (15, 23-24). Johnson argues that Paul is not writing to resolve an internal crisis in Rome, and it is for this reason that many scholars posit that Paul's composition of *Romans* was motivated more from his own personal plans and circumstances than from a crisis within the congregation.<sup>34</sup> The basic premise is that Paul's purpose in writing was to announce his impending visit to the congregation in Rome, to give the readers an understanding of his preaching, and to establish a rapport, thus securing support for his mission to Spain. Johnson concurs with Gamble who argues for the authenticity of the sixteen-chapter form of the text, which makes sense if the primary purpose of the letter is to prepare the congregation in backing Paul's expedition, by essentially naming a network of people who can attest to Paul's worthiness.<sup>35</sup> Another widely advocated opinion considers Paul's anticipated visit to Jerusalem (15, 25), which argues that *Romans* contains major elements of the apologetic speech that Paul was planning to give in Jerusalem. While this view explains the nature and content of the letter, it is problematic why it was sent to Rome. An alternative perspective insists that Paul was acquainted with the circumstances of the Roman church and that he addresses those concerns directly, which would put *Romans* in line with the rest of his letters.<sup>36</sup> However, Johnson

<sup>31</sup> W. D. Davies, “Paul and the People of Israel,” *NTS* 24 (1977-78): 20. Quoted in Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, xli-xlii.

<sup>32</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, xlii-xliii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xliii.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Reading Romans*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Gamble, *The Textual History*, 134-35.

admits that the data are mixed, and need not be exclusive to one side or the other—meaning that it is quite possible that Paul was concerned with both his own plans and circumstances, *and* the general needs of the community in Rome.

Gamble points out that it is commonly concluded that *Romans* has little to no direct bearing on the Roman community because (1) Paul did not establish this church and had never visited it, and it is therefore assumed that he had no knowledge of the actual circumstances; (2) *Romans* lacks the explicit directness to the conditions of the community found in Paul's other letters; and (3) there are textual forms in the tradition that do not refer to Rome at all, which is taken to show that Paul may have sent, or was intending to send, the letter to other communities as well. Such a generic letter could not be concerned with unique circumstances. Yet each of these premises is problematic.<sup>37</sup> If chapter sixteen was an integral part of the letter, then Paul may very well have had specific knowledge of the community. The reasons why the letter seems to be vague may lie in the fact that Paul had not visited the church in Rome, and that he had not previously exerted his authority there. Furthermore, the generalized forms of the text do not necessarily indicate with certainty that the letter was ever intended to have a general applicability.

The task of reconstructing the correlation between the content of the letter and the circumstances of the recipients is presently beyond any firm conclusion. The strongest evidence may lie in the effects of the edict of Claudius (circa 49 CE), which purportedly involved a large-scale expulsion of Jews from Rome. Gamble

argues that if Roman Jewish-Christians fell under this ban, then the concerns of the Roman letter would be relevant to the situation of the congregation—after the proscription was rescinded and the Jewish-Christian constituency attempted to reestablish itself in Rome. However, Gamble continues that it is still necessary to keep Paul's preoccupations with Jerusalem in view in order to grasp the epistolary situation as a whole, and further suggests a convergence with the issues confronting the Roman Community.<sup>38</sup> Fitzmeyer concludes that Paul wrote *Romans* for *ad hoc* purposes—to introduce himself and to seek support for his mission to Spain—as well as to address some of the concrete problems of the Roman community. First he writes to expound his missionary reflections on the gospel, in particular his gospel of justification without the deeds of the law, but also to deal with divisions in the community between the “strong” and the “weak.”<sup>39</sup>

### *A Gnostic Reading of Romans 1:18-32*

In commenting on *Romans*, Elaine Pagels examines patterns that seem to be consistent and fundamental to Valentinian exegesis.<sup>40</sup> She notes that scholarship tends to portray Paul as an opponent of Gnostic heresy, and that he writes his letters to attack Gnosticism and to refute the claims of Gnostic Christians to secret wisdom. However, instead of repudiating Paul as an opponent, Gnostic writers claim his letters as a primary source of Gnostic theology. Furthermore, texts from the Nag Hammadi discovery offer new evidence for a Gnostic Pauline tradition.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>39</sup> Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 79-80.

<sup>40</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 1, 16-17.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 136.

In alluding to verses 19-20, Valentinus explains that those who see “in faith” perceive in the visible cosmos an image of the invisible God. From a Jewish perspective the text warns against pagan idolatry, but from a Gnostic perspective it warns against worship of the demiurge, by exchanging the truth of God for a lie. According to Pagels, the distorted relationship with God results in unnatural human relationships, but that pneumatic readers do not concern themselves with conventional morality. Instead, the reference to homosexuality is understood as a metaphor for the hidden mystery and separation of Adam and Eve, who typify the pneumatic (elect) from the psychics (non-elect). Thus, the initiated reader learns from *Romans* that psychics and pneumatics hear the message of Christ and experience redemption in qualitatively different ways.<sup>41</sup>

#### *A Gendered Reading of Romans 1:18-32*

In his chapter on *Romans* in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, Thomas Hanks outlines some of the major criticisms from a Gender Studies perspective.<sup>42</sup> Notably he highlights the boundaries of the text in question as beginning with 1:18 and ending with 2:16. Taken as a whole, it is argued that the “wickedness” Paul outlines in 1:18-32 is a rhetorical trap, which he then deconstructs in 2:1-16 by warning the reader against judging others. He also notes that there are two rhetorical traps with proceeding deconstructions, the first with 1:18-32 and 2:1-16, which is set up for Jews, and the second in 9:1-29 and 9:30-11:36, which is meant for Gentiles.

Throughout *Romans*, Paul calls into question and deconstructs the legalistic use of the Hebrew Bible and the excessive Jewish concern with purity, in favor of the “end of the Law” in Christ so that there may be “liberating justice resulting in a new status for everyone believing (10:4).” In contrast to the perceived emphasis on homosexual condemnation, the focus of *Romans* is largely against ethical absolutism and instead on the love of neighbor that avoids harm, oppression, violence and injustice toward others.<sup>43</sup>

It is also posited that the majority of the names that Paul includes in his list are names that were common to slaves in the Roman world. Slaves were not permitted to wed, whereas only three people that Paul mentions are married, which is significant in that the majority of the constituents of the congregation were likely political and sexual minorities, and as such, *Romans* must be viewed with imperial oppression and abuse of power in mind. Thus read, 1:18-32 is aimed at the excessive pagan practices and injustices of the oppressive ruling class, which often involved sexual abuse of slaves.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, there is a notable distinction between the unnatural sexual activity of women and men. It is unclear in verse 26 whether Paul is speaking specifically about lesbianism, or if he is speaking in more generalized terms of acts “contrary to nature.” It is plausible that, like today, there are degrees of discrimination in Paul's conception between female and male sexual practices. It is argued that the lack of emphasis on lesbianism is likely because in Paul's patriarchal society, any

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Hanks, “Romans,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. Deryn Guest et al.; London: SCM Press, 2006), 582-605. Rather than quoting each criticism individually, this brief survey will be limited to a selection of Hanks' observations of the work of others.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 585-587.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 583-584. For more information on Christianity and the Roman Empire see Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006).

sexual act for women that was not for the intended purposes of procreation was considered unnatural.<sup>45</sup> To add to this point, Fitzmeyer quotes John Chrysostom who stated that women “ought to have more shame than men.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, according to James Miller, most modern readers merely assume that both female and male homosexuality is being condemned in parity. However, he argues that the Classical world lacked a common category such as homosexual for both gays and lesbians. Thus, he makes a case to understand the description in verse 26 as referring to unnatural heterosexual intercourse.<sup>47</sup>

A case has also been made for interpreting Romans 1:26-27 as referring specifically to cultic sexual practices. It is argued that when God has “handed over” the wicked to their passions, the punishment is not forthcoming, but rather has already been received as a way of degraded being. Taken as such, homosexual acts are treated as a consequence of a prior sin (namely idolatry).<sup>48</sup> Although speculative, the received penalty could include venereal diseases, castration, transvestitism, and unclean sexual acts found in cultic practices.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to pro-homosexual readings of Romans 1, Robert Gagnon takes an anti-homosexual stance in Scriptural interpretation. In his book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, he systematically addresses exegetical and hermeneutical issues regarding Paul and Romans 1.<sup>50</sup>

The table of contents is a helpful place to start in identifying some of the major arguments around homosexuality and the text in question. While he admits that Jesus did not speak directly on the issue, he claims that his silence and support of the authority of the Old Testament is witness against same-sex intercourse. From this premise, it was then left up to Paul to articulate clear instructions for the church, then and now, on same-sex intercourse. Furthermore, he claims that Christians “must” base their moral doctrine regarding homosexuality on Romans 1:24-27 in particular because, among other things, it speaks most decidedly about the issue and it is “one of the most difficult texts for proponents of homosexual behavior to overturn.”<sup>51</sup>

Gagnon reads the main message of *Romans* to be that all have sinned and are culpable before God. In regards to the intentions of the letter, he makes the claim that Paul wanted to put an end to divisiveness over minor matters (homosexuality not being a minor matter). According to Gagnon, when Paul speaks of not judging other Christians, it would be a mistake to think he meant that believers should stop judging homosexual Christians.<sup>52</sup> Thus the rejection of homosexual practice, as well as other sins in verses 24-31, is not just a trap for self-righteous people who judge others, but a prelude to the moral claims of the gospel about right conduct.

Gagnon continues stating that in Romans 1:18-32 Paul employs a Hellenic-Jewish critique of gentile sin in which God does not judge them for ignorance, but rather for acting contrary to the knowledge they already have about right and wrong. He

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 591-593.

<sup>46</sup> Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 287. See also John Chrysostom, *In ep. ad Romanos* Hom 4:1 (PG 60.417).

<sup>47</sup> James E. Miller, “The Practices of Romans 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?” *NT 37.1* (1995): 1.

<sup>48</sup> Hanks, “Romans,” 588-589.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 594.

<sup>50</sup> Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 229-231.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 277-284.

notes that in verses 24, 26, and 28 that God “gives them over” three times, each time followed by a reference to conscious human “exchange”—exchanging the glory of God for idols, exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and exchanging natural for unnatural sex. Notably, Gagnon makes the claim that in verse 26 Paul is speaking specifically about lesbianism.<sup>53</sup> He counters the observation that Paul does not speak specifically about female-female sexual relations by stating that the parallel wording in verse 27 infers it, and the use of the word “likewise” suggests that the actions must be the same.<sup>54</sup>

He continues further to state that when Paul speaks of sexual practices contrary to nature, it was for him just a matter of commonsense observation of human anatomy, male-female complementarity and procreative function, which even pagans had no excuse for not knowing.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to pro-homosexual views, Gagnon maintains that Paul was adamantly against homosexuality as a sin deserving of no less than death. He also argues that Paul is not condemning those who condemn homosexual practice in the material immediately following 1:18-32, but rather that Christians must not live like the sinful people described.<sup>56</sup>

#### *A Note on the Expression “Physis”*

The word *physis* or “nature” occurs fourteen times as a noun and three times as an adjective in the New Testament. James DeYoung claims that part of the “new” approach to *Romans* “tries to give approval to homosexual nature or behavior” by focusing on “new ways” of

understanding Paul's use of “nature” or *physis* in verses 26-27.<sup>57</sup> For example, Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 11:14 in speaking against men who grow their hair long as being contrary to nature, which in this context is largely viewed as a social convention. In his article, he attempts to counter claims that Paul is speaking more specifically about Greek pederasty and that there is no way of knowing whether Paul would oppose a caring adult relationship of mutuality. DeYoung argues that the use of *physis* in *Romans* should be taken to mean part of the natural created order, since it is used in relative context to the word “Creator,” in comparison to the use of *physis* in 1 Corinthians 11:14 where there is no reference to a divine Creator or creation in the text.

He further argues that Paul writes from a more biblical or Hebraic reference than Hellenist, particularly in his Scriptural understanding of creation and homosexuality in *Leviticus* and *Genesis* respectively. Thus, based on the Jewish models, DeYoung argues that Paul is decidedly against all forms of sexual expression between same sexes in *Romans*. Fitzmeyer concurs with DeYoung that “nature,” in the context of *Romans* 1, expresses for Paul the intended order of the Creator, or more specifically in the order seen in the function of the sexual organs themselves. He further dismisses the use of the term *physis* as a social convention in 1 Corinthians 11:14 as having little theological significance and relevance for the context in *Romans*.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 231, 251.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 297-299.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-256.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-279.

<sup>57</sup> James B. DeYoung, “The Meaning of ‘Nature’ in *Romans* 1 and its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior,” *JETS* 31.4 (Dec 1988): 421; 437-41.

<sup>58</sup> Fitzmeyer, *Romans*, 286-287.

### *Final Considerations*

While there are some variations in the textual tradition of *Romans*, it is generally concluded that the fifteen and sixteen-chapter form represent the most likely version of the text. Furthermore, it has been convincingly argued by Gamble that the sixteen-chapter version, which on the surface exhibits some incongruities, makes sense in light of Paul's anticipated visit and the need to establish a network of support for his travel plans to Spain. However, some scholars postulate that the body of *Romans* may have been produced in a more generic form that excluded a specific introduction and conclusion, which could later be added and addressed to different communities. Whichever the case, the textual evidence shows that the letter was at some point intended specifically for the Jewish-Christian community in Rome.

Although *Romans* exhibits a unique form that encompasses many genres, it is undoubtedly a letter generated by Paul that he addressed to real people with a real purpose. Paul writes from a Hellenic-Jewish perspective, citing Jewish Scripture and drawing from the Jewish Wisdom Tradition, while also utilizing the prevalent modes of Hellenic discourse. The diatribe in *Romans* is arguably one of the most important features to understand in reading the text, in which Paul presents theses and antitheses, and uses rhetorical devices, in offering a dialogical homily that focuses on his theological insights, moral proscriptions and communal ethics. It is likely that the writing of *Romans* was generated from a complex combination of concerns, which include Paul's anticipated meeting with the Jewish-Christian congregation in Jerusalem, his missionary

plans in Spain, and the Jewish-Gentile divisions in Rome and elsewhere.

Criticism of Romans 1:18-32 highlights the text as an antithetical and rhetorical trap for Jewish-Christians, whose Jewish heritage was fraught with tension and legalistic separatist ideologies that ultimately led to judgmental attitudes toward Gentiles—and vice versa. Paul struggles to establish unity and solidarity between Jewish and Gentile Christians, by arguing against ethical absolutism and emphasizing the point of not judging others. The heavy allusion to Jewish Scripture strongly indicates that the intended audience is the Jewish-Christians of the congregation in Rome (and perhaps more generally across the board). Given the larger context of *Romans* is one of unity, the fact that Paul alludes to Scripture and that he is essentially contradicting himself by being judgmental suggests that the emphasis is not so much on a new condemnation. Rather he is reiterating a list of vices from the common Jewish understanding. In a paraphrased version, Paul is essentially saying, "Yes, we already know these things are wrong, but it is also wrong and not Christianly to go around judging others. Instead, we should join together in solidarity in Christ, which is manifest in loving, nonjudgmental relationships between Jews and Gentiles alike."

The question remains: How should contemporary readers understand Romans 1:18-32? Evidence from Early Gnostic-Christian exegesis shows that the interpretive tradition of the text has been qualitatively diverse from early on, and contemporary religious-political debates serve to highlight the continued polarity. Much of the current criticism at the polarized ends of the spectrum focuses on

Paul's intended meaning and level of discrimination against homosexuality. Arguments vary, but it appears semantically evident that Paul views homosexuality as the result of sin; however, as Kalin points out:

Contemporary discussions of homosexuality seem to take it for granted that in these verses we have Paul's firm conviction that homosexual acts are sinful. Though Paul surely understands what he describes in vv. 26-27 to be reprehensible, the context shows that these acts are not the "sins" to which he is directing our attention. These verses are part of a demonstration by Paul that the Gentiles [...] are sinful beyond measure. The sin of the Gentiles that evokes God's wrath is their failure to worship God [...] The Gentiles' impurity and degrading of their bodies (evidenced in vv. 26-27) and their debased mind and their doing of the things that ought not be done (evidenced in vv. 29-31) are the *result* of their idolatry.<sup>59</sup>

Paul is restating the legal codes against vices (i.e., Leviticus) and the general mindset of Judaism, which had long since identified idolatry as a major source of contention, and his reference to homosexuality is incidental. Kuhn adds to this saying:

Within the broader argument of Rom 1:18-32, Paul presents same-gender sexual practice as one among many manifestations and consequences of humanity straying from God's intentions for humanity, including also idolatry, envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossiping, conniving, backbiting, and disobedience to parents. To be sure, Paul's main concern in this section of Romans is not homosexuality *per se* but the depravity of *all* humankind (not simply Gentiles, in my view), hence the expansive list of depraved activities. Nor do his comments on homoerotic activity present a view distinct from first-century Judaism. Thus,

to argue that homosexuality was of special concern for Paul or seen by him as an especially egregious violation of the created order grossly overstates the evidence. Nevertheless, Paul's assessment of same-gender sexual activity is clear: It is not what God intended for human sexuality—it is unnatural—and it represents a breakdown in the relationship between God and humanity, and humanity with one another.<sup>60</sup>

The emphasis on the "naturalness" of homosexuality lies at the heart of the debate. While there is good argument that Paul's use of *physis* in the context of Romans 1 refers to homosexuality as against the created order, it does little to disprove his understanding of what is "natural" as a social convention (such as with 1 Corinthians 11:14). The fact that Paul had a learned Jewish background and uses heavy allusion to Jewish Scripture, and the fact that Hellenist Pagans viewed homosexuality otherwise, serves to confirm the social construction. Furthermore, as David Daube notes, the stories of Genesis 1–3 are often quoted as the model of God's created order for proper sexual relations; however, the stories that celebrate the creation of male and female, and the blessings of procreation and becoming "one flesh," are not commands.<sup>61</sup> It is argued that to use these texts to limit the creativity of the Creator in shaping and forming a diverse creation runs the risk of transforming a wonderful blessing into a command that excludes and condemns a part of the diversity that perhaps is God's design for creation. From this perspective, it seems ironic that the whole discussion hinges on

<sup>59</sup> Kalin, "Romans," 430.

<sup>60</sup> Kuhn, "Natural and Unnatural Relations," 318-319.  
<sup>61</sup> David Daube, *The Duty of Procreation* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1977), 1–6. Quoted in Gwen A. Saylor, "Beyond the Biblical Impasse: Homosexuality Through the Lens of Theological Anthropology," *DJT* 44.1 (2005): 86.

the authority of Paul's constructed understanding. However, following Paul's lead, there is a tendency to appeal to an intuitive conception of what ought to be in the world designed by God in distinguishing "natural" from "unnatural" intercourse.

In examining this topic, Gwen Saylor asks the question why Paul and other ancient writers define certain sexual distinctions as "unnatural," and answers by stating that

writing as a man of his time and culture, [Paul] does share with them (Philo and Josephus) and with Greco-Roman authors certain assumptions about proper gender-role configurations. That Paul condemns same-sex sexual intercourse as "unnatural" is clear. Why he condemns it also is clear. He does so based on a hierarchical theological anthropology that defines men as active penetrating agents and women as passive penetrated recipients. At stake is what we call proper gender role distinction.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Gignac notes the hierarchical construction of genres presented in Romans 1:18-32, and raises the question to the modern reader whether it is possible to construct a theological and anthropological discussion of the text not in patriarchal vertical terms of order, dualism and hierarchy, but rather in horizontal terms of harmony, complexity and reciprocity.<sup>63</sup> He suggests that the confusion arises from the fact that the Bible and the text in question represent each of these themes, and that to pick one over the other distorts the reading. Gignac claims not to take a theological or anthropological position on the relevance of the text—rather he points out, from a feminist perspective, the danger of a non-

critical acceptance of the hierarchical rhetoric that exists in the text. Thus, his observations assist the modern reader—not to argue a side—but to acknowledge both.

In discussing how to approach Romans 1, Kuhn argues that many readers try to understand *the text* in a way that both honors Scripture and also allows for the possibility that homosexual relationships may not be contrary to the will of God; however, this says something that Paul likely did not mean.<sup>64</sup> Instead of trying to find ways around Paul's intended meaning, Kuhn calls for a contextual, canonical reading that examines the passage in relation to the whole biblical tradition, which provides the text with possibilities of meaning it would not possess if read in isolation. Similarly, James Zabnisser and Craig Boyd call for elevating compassion for the person above articulating a judgment on the issue of homosexuality. They claim further that an "overemphasis on judgments and opinions can actually interfere with the practice of Christian compassion," and that, "[e]stablishing an opinion does not necessarily lead to the practice of Christian virtues in relationship to people."<sup>65</sup>

Many critiques of Romans 1 put emphasis on the literal veracity of Paul's intended meaning, and for some, to state otherwise would mean changing the Bible and not taking it seriously. For example, DeYoung concludes his article by stating that "[i]f it has been at least reasonably demonstrated that Paul opposes all forms of sexual expression between the same sex in Romans 1, then his judgments are [...]

<sup>62</sup> Saylor, "Beyond the Biblical Impasse," 85.

<sup>63</sup> Alain Gignac, "Résister au texte pour repenser les «genres»?" 16, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Kuhn, "Natural and Unnatural Relations," 319-320.

<sup>65</sup> James H. Zabnisser and Craig A. Boyd, "The Work of Love, the Practice of Compassion and the Homosexual Neighbor," *JPC* 27.3 (2008): 216.

'eternally valid.' Revisionist interpretations would do well to come under the authority of Scripture."<sup>66</sup> DeYoung's remark highlights that there is a definitive etymological link between authorship and authority. The authority of *Romans* lies in Paul's authorship, and Paul was, after all, a fallible human being. However, it would be an error to suggest that in saying this one takes the Bible less seriously. It is an ethical fallacy to state that if one questions the literal, face-value interpretation of Scripture that they are somehow less understanding or devaluing God's will. Furthermore, there are many instances in the Bible that challenge contemporary perspectives. For instance, it is commonly quoted that if every proscription were followed *verbatim*, everyone wearing clothing made from a blend of two or more fabrics would be sinning, and it would be within a parent's right to stone their child for being disobedient. This is hardly appropriate for conventional norms.

There is, of course, a gross difference in most people's minds between clothing and homosexuality; however, the point is sufficiently made that it is not a question whether the intended meaning of biblical texts such as *Romans 1* should or should not be contradicted because of a changed circumstances in modern times—many texts already are. However, this also does not give license for wanton disregard of the moral teachings found in the Bible, but rather that some of the rhetoric should be reconsidered within an appropriate ethical framework. This means considering the possibility that the texts often cited as "proof" that the Bible condemns homosexuality reflect a theological anthropology that is challenged within

Scripture itself. Additionally, unless further evidence surfaces, humanity will never know with certainty the full implications of Paul's intended meaning, and if he would think differently in light of contemporary circumstances.

The question of how Scripture ministers to people today becomes particularly acute with the lack of consensus and compromise on the meaning and relevancy of the texts. However, given the fact that these issues have remained unresolved for thousands of years, it seems sufficient to say that the value and unity of Scripture is not found in either consensus or compromise. Rather they are discovered in the vulnerability of the human life and the struggles with diversity in a community, which can lead to an enriched way of being that is manifested in appropriate choices and balances—and above all love of God and love of neighbor. To impose a staunch literalism of the letter or to insist on conversion to one side or the other is simply missing the point.

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<sup>66</sup> DeYoung, "The Meaning of Nature," 440-441.

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