

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

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Chapter 18

Patristics 1

What the Church Fathers Thought on the Big Three

New Testament Texts on Homosexuality

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What the Church Fathers Thought on the Big Three New Testament Texts on Homosexuality

Long ago Augustine wrote a pastoral piece on marriage including a section on proper and improper sexual relations within marriage (*De Bono Conj.* 11-12). First he made the point that sexual activity within marriage was for procreation, which he deemed a necessity. Sexual activity beyond this necessity was therefore undesirable though potentially "pardonable" within marriage. But there was also sexual activity in marriage which was "unnatural" and not merely unnecessary. At this point he paraphrased Romans 1:26 and stated that such acts were abominable when performed by a prostitute, but even more abominable when performed by the wife. Augustine goes on to describe the abominable act as the husband gratifying himself with an inappropriate part of his wife's anatomy.

In an early study on patristic responses to Romans 1:26 Bernadette Brooten (1985) inquired of Augustine's exegesis, "How is it possible to interpret the verse as not referring to sexual relations between women?" In response she pointed out that the verse from Romans was not specific about the sexual partner, and though Augustine elsewhere expressed his disapproval of sexual relations between women, he did not understand Romans 1:26 to reference such relationships.

Augustine's comments and Brooten's question highlight two issues which should be studied to understand Biblical sexuality, and contrast it with later sexual norms in the various churches. One issue is the precise meaning of the three anti-homosexual texts of the New Testament as illuminated by ancient commentators. The second issue is the development of the sex-negative tradition in the early church. This chapter and the following one will examine these two issues. In this chapter, by exploring the three texts, we will find some insight in how different the ancient sexual culture was, and how this impacts our reading of the text.

Patristic Commentary on the Three Texts

Of the key texts understood as describing homosexuality in the New Testament, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, only two patristic authors analyse these texts directly, one in a late, marginal notation. The other authors offer incidental readings of the texts. The incidental patristic use of these texts presupposes

agreement from the reader concerning the understanding of the Biblical texts. These writers give us unexceptional understandings of the texts from the perspective of antiquity, understandings that they thought required no argument.

The first patristic commentator is Athenagoras, who paraphrases Romans 1:27 in his *Embassy* addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus in the late 2nd century. In the *Embassy* 33-34 Athenagoras first describes all remarriage as adultery (including for widowers), stating that they had their chance to enjoy sexual pleasure in their first marriage, and any further marriage would be lascivious. After denouncing remarriage he introduces another unacceptable practice by paraphrasing Romans 1:27. He sums up the aforementioned as "these adulterers and pederasts" (οἱ μοιχοὶ καὶ παιδερασταί). Clearly Athenagoras understood Romans 1:27 as a description of pederasty. Incidentally, Athenagoras begins this passage by stating that marital activity is for the purpose of procreation, not to satisfy appetite (or lust). He uses the analogy of sowing seed in a field with the expectation of a harvest, an agricultural metaphor we will meet again. Though Athenagoras used a Biblical text to attack pederasty, he offers no such text against remarriage of the bereaved or against non-procreative sexual activity.

A decade or so later Clement of Alexandria, in an infamous passage from the second book of his *Pedagogue*, goes into livid detail concerning sexual practices. Chapter 10 of the second book begins with the agricultural metaphor that sexual activity is to be limited to procreation, similar to the argument of Athenagoras. Clement derives the metaphor from Philo of Alexandria, and Philo's metaphor is derived from Plato's *Laws* (Philo *SpL* 3.32-34, 39; *Vita Cont.* 62; Plato *Laws* 838d-839a; cf. *Timaeos* 91d). The metaphor argues that it is foolish to sow seed on land which is sterile and cannot produce a crop. The metaphor parallels sowing with sexual intercourse and indicates that it is foolish and inappropriate for a man to "sow" his semen/seed where it cannot grow, including in a barren woman or the rectum of a boy. According to Plato, Philo, Clement and Athenagoras, semen should be sown only when and where it can grow into a full-length pregnancy.

In paragraphs 86-87 Clement quotes Romans 1:26-27 and expounds these two verses by describing a single sexual activity. Immediately he points out that even the most lusty animals do not make sexual use of the fecal passage

(ουδε τοις λαγνιστατοις των ζωνων . . . της περιτωσεως πορον επιθορουν).¹ Clement goes on to condemn penetration of males (αρρενομιξιας), barren seed sowing (ακαρπους σπορας), rear intercourse (κατοπιν ευνας) and futile androgynous intercourse (αδυμφυεις ανδρογυνους κοινωνιας).² Clearly Clement considered both verses, Romans 1:26-27, as describing a single common sexual activity -- anal penetration. Clement had one particular barren field in mind.

If there is any remaining question on the subject of Clement's exposition, this passage is embedded in a discussion of two representative animals, the hare and the hyena (see Appendix 2). As Clement understands it, the hare is impregnated through the anus, with a new one grown every year. He claims the hare also has two uteruses so it can become pregnant immediately upon giving birth. Meanwhile Clement explores the belief that the hyena alternates its gender between male and female. This confuses even the hyenas, so that males commonly mount fellow males.³ Oddly it is the heterosexual hare, not the bisexual hyena which Clement equates with pederasty. So, for Clement these two animal practitioners of non-vaginal intercourse illustrate Romans 1:26-27.

Brooten describes a marginal notation in two manuscripts of Clement ascribed to a certain Anastasios, an unidentified patristic commentator.⁴ Anastasios comments on verse 26 to make explicit that, "obviously they do not enter each other, but rather to men they grant themselves."⁵ In other words verse 26 is heterosexual. It is not clear whether Anastasios is quoted as clarifying verse 26 directly or clarifying Clement's exposition of verse 26. Anastasios' comment, of uncertain date, is the first indication that there may be some who interpret Romans 1:26 as sexual relations between women, for Anastasios takes pains to reject that reading. Why does Anastasios consider his

¹ Cf. Philo, *De Animalibus* 49-50, Terian pp. 89, 239-240.

² The precise meaning of this last term is debated.

³ Female hyenas have high levels of androgens during early development, which results in the apparent development of male genitalia. Some ancient biologists concluded that they were males, at least for part of their lives. Hence the biological oddities described here and in Barnabas 10:6-8 were used to admonish the faithful.

⁴ Probably Anastasios of Sinai, late 7th century, who is known for his *scolia*. However, the commentator could be another Anastasios.

⁵ Stahlin & Treu 331.6-8.

Ουκ αλληλας βαινουσαι δηλαδη, αλλα τοις ανδρασιν ουτω παρεγουσαι εαυτας. Ουτως Αναστασιος εν τω εις την προς Κορινθιους εξηγητικω.

interpretation to be obvious (δηλαδη)? Plato's agricultural metaphor requires someone to sow seeds in barren places. Two women have no "seed" to sow, and cannot be scolded for wasting their seed. In Clement's context a man is required. As Clement himself sees no need to argue the interpretation of Romans 1:26, apparently he found its meaning to be obvious prior to placing it in this context. For Clement Romans 1:26-27 describe a common sex act, a sex act which Clement finds comprehensible through Plato's agricultural metaphor. In his culture Romans 1:26 refers to alternative heterosexual activity.

Athanagoras, Clement and Augustine all understood Romans 1:26-27 in terms of infertile intercourse. However, the New Testament ignores reproduction as a sexual value. Is it necessary to accept an infertility reading to accept their understandings of these verses? No, for there are alternatives. Romans 1:27 describes lust as the motivator for the males, but it is not mentioned as the motivator for their females in verse 26. If male lust is the active element, their females may exchange the natural use for the unnatural under the pressure of that lust, just as younger males, often slaves, gratify the lust of the older males in verse 27 (cf. PsPhokylides, *Sentences* 213-214; see Appendix 3). The degrading lusts (παθη ατιμιας, *pathe atimias*) of these idolatrous males may be read as abusive, and as the force which produces the degrading relationships of these two verses. Infertile emissions need not be read into this passage.

Soon after Clement's *Pedagogue*, Hippolytus wrote his *Refutation of All Heresies*, the earliest extant patristic interpretation of the Pauline term *arsenokoites* (αρσενοκοιτης, 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). Prior uses of the term (e.g. Polycarp, *Phil.* 5.3) follow Paul's example and merely list the vice without explication. However, Hippolytus provides us with some specificity on his understanding of the term. In this passage Hippolytus is describing the teachings of a heretic named Naas. Here he describes the heretical version of the fall of Adam (5.26.23-24). First the serpent or Lawless One approached Eve and "adulterated" (εμοιχευσεν) her. Then the Lawless One approached Adam and "ejaculated into him like a boy" (εισχεν αυτον 'ως παιδικα). As a result there was "adultery and *arsenokoitia*" (μοιχεια και αρσενοκοιτια), so the term *arsenokoitia* describes ejaculation into a boy. This incidental use by Hippolytus gives us our most explicit understanding of the Pauline term αρσενοκοιτης found in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. The text shares with Athenagoras the Patristic pairing of adultery and pederasty. Hippolytus' use

of *arsenokoitia* might be read as inclusive of sex between two adult males, but it is significant that he understood such relationships solely through the lens of pederasty, the sexual relationship between males which was familiar to him.

We have already looked at Augustine's use of Romans 1:26 two centuries after Clement's comments.⁶ It is Augustine's contemporary John Chrysostom who provides us with our earliest extant homosexual reading of this verse, the reading implied and rejected by Anastasios. The reference occurs in Chrysostom's fourth *Homily on Romans*, 456. It is by context that we understand this to be a description of Romans 1:26-27 (this homily expositis the second half of Romans 1), for Chrysostom does not actually quote the verse when he states that "women violated (ὄβριζον, *hubrizon*) women and not just men, and the men opposed each other as well as women."⁷ As with the earlier patristic writers, Chrysostom assumes his understanding of these verses and sees no need to argue the point. Chrysostom is our earliest patristic interpreter who found female homosexual activity in Romans 1:26 and the lone patristic source which read verse 27 as sex between adult males. Ambrosiaster (pseudo-Ambrose), who probably was a contemporary of Chrysostom and Augustine, eventually joins Chrysostom in finding sexual desire between women in Romans 1:26, but that is not where he started.

Ambrosiaster is an important Latin commentary writer who wrote three editions of his commentary on Romans. In the first (α) edition he briefly comments on Romans 1:26, stating that because of idolatry, women allowed themselves to be used by men in an unnatural way. In this he joins with Clement and Augustine in their reading of this text. However, in the second (β) and third (γ) editions of the commentary he changed his mind and said that in lust women sought to use woman (β) or female sought to use female (γ). This is followed by a lengthy paragraph explaining his choice of interpretation, a paragraph which he did not find necessary for his first edition.

Clearly for Ambrosiaster, a heterosexual reading of Romans 1:26 was unexceptional and seemingly obvious. Understanding this verse as a reference to same-sex relations between women, in contrast, is a reading which he felt required extensive

⁶ Though Augustine also comments on Romans 1:26 in *City of God* 14.23, there he explicitly avoids getting specific on its meaning for the sake of modesty.

⁷ Oddly Chrysostom used the term ἀνδρός where Paul used ἀρσεν, and γυνή instead of Paul's θήλυς.

explanation – it is not a simple reading of the text for him. Though same-sex readings of Romans 1:26 appear in our texts as early as the late 4th century, a heterosexual reading remained a strong and obvious reading which had its roots as early as the mid-2nd century.

Though the patristic authors are not infallible interpreters of the Scriptures, they are witnesses to how these texts were understood in antiquity. The earliest three authors wrote their works in a pagan world which they shared with Paul, prior to Christian domination of the Roman Empire. Also, all but two of these writers had koine Greek as their primary language. In other words, these writers provide us with our best resources on understanding Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 within their linguistic and cultural context. Modern expositors may disagree with any or all of these early writers, but may not dismiss their understandings of the texts. Rather, these readings must remain a permanent option for the exegete.

The issue at hand in this chapter goes beyond the specific understanding of the two verses and a term used twice in the New Testament. It has to do with the mind set of the period, the cultural interests and categories which stand behind the texts which we are studying. As a general rule, neither Jew nor Greek in the pagan Roman Empire thought of homosexuality in modern categories. In the ancient world our modern category of homosexuality was divided into three separate subjects, all of which were paralleled with heterosexual relationships and rarely with each other. Sexual relationships between women, when considered, were deemed ridiculous. Sex between adult males was ridiculous, scandalous or criminal, and mentioned rarely outside of comic references. However, sex with a boy was commonplace, unexceptional. The boy often was a slave, performing under duress. Any of the three homosexual relationships could be paralleled with comparable heterosexual relationships and activities. There is no surprise that early readers of the New Testament texts applied them specifically to the sexual issues which interested them – pederasty and various forms of heterosexuality. There is good reason for assuming that the same subjects were intended by Paul as well.

My articles on Romans 1:26-27 concentrate on anterior reasons why the former verse should be understood as heterosexual and the latter understood as pederasty.⁹ In

⁹ There is a persistent misreading of my papers among some scholars. Both papers (Miller 1995, 1997) study ancient discourse on sexual activities, not the

contrast, most modern scholars assume or argue a homosexual reading of Romans 1:26 and for the other three texts a reading which is not pederasty-specific (e.g. Balch, *passim*), reading these texts through thoroughly modern lenses. We have a singular category of homosexuality, they did not. Whatever arguments are brought concerning the understanding of these texts, the early witnesses remain and do not allow for their readings to be removed from the repertoire of the modern scholar. Also, the ancient witnesses do not allow their interpretations to be understood as "revisionist" (cf. Wold, p. 185). If anything it is Wold and other modern expositors who are revisionist.

We will deal with another use of the term "revisionist" in the next chapter.

frequency of the activities themselves. Frequency of any ancient sexual activity *cannot* be known. What can be studied is frequency of discourse on an activity, and the terms, expressions and rhetoric used in the ancient literature which indicate attitudes toward an activity.