
1 Perhaps the major weakness in both Loader’s recent volumes (2010; 2012) is the failure to change the question. Loader’s exegesis of the relevant texts usually concludes that they are correctly interpreted by Robert Gagnon, whose two relevant books (2001; 2003 with Dan O. Via) and website (www.robgagnon.net) Loader refers to 40 times in his chapter on same-sex acts (2010:7-34; similarly 2012:293-338, 36 references). Loader 2010 contains a respectable sprinkling of alternate voices (e.g. William Countrymen 1998/2007, 11 times) and Loader 2012 has encyclopedic references to similar alternative views (pp. 1-500, with a 40 page bibliography). Unquestionably Gagnon’s works provide a valuable resource, but Loader’s immense contribution would have been even greater had he more aggressively challenged the way Gagnon’s ideology drives and distorts his exegesis (cf. James Brownson 2013). Rather than following writers like Gagnon in their desperate effort to find a text that clearly condemns all same-sex acts as sinful, a more revealing question would be to ask whether, how and to what extent heterosexist and homophobic presuppositions (majority propaganda) have distorted translations, exegesis and hermeneutics (for centuries, but including contemporary interpreters).

Holly Hearon elaborates the relevance of my point: “In any debate of consequence control belongs to the one who can define the terms of the debate” (“1 Corinthians”, *The Queer Bible Commentary*; London: SCM, 2006:608). Although I referred specifically to Gagnon, he is only the most obvious recent champion of a church tradition that has become desperate to nail down a few Pauline texts, having lost control of the great traditional homophobic bulwark—the Bible’s 48 texts on Sodom. If we change the question and explore the evidence of heterosexism and homophobia in traditional translations and interpretations, a very different picture emerges and people like Gagnon are put on the defensive rather than the offensive. If they are left to control the debate question and terms, they only need to establish a good possibility that a single verse in the Bible condemns all same-sex acts and this prompts the simplistic conclusion that “The Bible condemns homosexuality,” which can have devastating pastoral and judicial-political consequences (death penalties, fatal addictions, suicides). However, if the question is changed, the supporting evidence is endless and can motivate and empower people to begin to question and distrust traditional views and majority propaganda.

Evidence that such is the case abounds throughout 2000+ years of mistranslation and misinterpretation of the relevant texts. The major example would be the common imposition of the death penalty on “sodomites” throughout most of church history instead of recognizing that Genesis 19 and the 48 related biblical references to Sodom refer at most to an attempted gang rape of two visiting angels, never to sexual love between consensual humans (as if Nathan’s condemnation of David’s adultery with Bathsheba could justify a condemnation of the king’s “heterosexuality”). A prime scholarly example would be F. W. Danker’s correction (Chicago, 2000:135) of the earlier editions of the BDAG Greek lexicon that “translated” Paul’s *arsenokoitai* as “homosexuals” (see RSV 1946, 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10), when—whatever the preferred translation—Paul’s term indicates a sexual act with no reference to sexual orientations and quite explicitly an act by males not females). Thus, by simply changing the question, we get a radically different view of the phenomenon surveyed. Similarly, when we focus on the “problem” of the Jews, women, persons of color, or the poor, we arrive at highly distorted conclusions compared to when we change the question to study the problems of anti-semitism, sexism, racism, and the rich. Although Loader poses questions using Greek philosophical categories (“moral/ethical”), at one point he recognizes that Paul introduces such philosophical categories (like “un/natural”) that the Hebrew Bible and Jesus had avoided (see below).
2 A second weakness is the occasional tendency to impose an arbitrary “ethical” unity on the rich diversity of exegetical perspectives regarding sexual matters, which Loader’s work itself so abundantly documents.

2.1 For instance, Loader writes: “The early Christian movement as it developed within Judaism was heavily influenced by Jewish assumptions…. Statements by Jesus appeared as the very opposite of loosening the demands of biblical law. They enhanced their strictness even further—such as on divorce and remarriage” (Loader 2012:3-4; see 240-92; 2010:80-97; similarly, Gagnon 2001:185-93; cf. Hanks → Mark 2000/08). Methodologically, such statements may be questioned on several grounds. Expressions such as “within Judaism” and “Jewish assumptions” encourage readers to forget the enormous diversity, which Loader has documented as characteristic of both the “Judaisms” and “Christianities” of the period. Then “Judaism” is identified with the “demands of biblical law” rather than giving full weight to the Wisdom literature (Song of Solomon; Ecclesiastes, Job) and narratives (Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan; see the contrast between the levirate law in Deuteronomy 25 with the divergent narratives about Tamar and Ruth).


1 L Divorce (→Mark 10:11-12 // Mat 19:19 // QMat 5:31-32 + Lk 16:18); cf. 1 Cor 7:10-11. Diversity
2 L Lustful eye, Mat 5:27-30 (29-30, excision saying: right eye, right hand)
3 L Anger and murder, Mat 5:21-26
4 L Heart defilement, Mk 7:15; cp. Lk 11:39-41 // Mat 23:25-26
5 L Excision sayings, Mk 9:42-48 // Mat 18:8-9 “Child abuse is most likely the target” (2012:149)
6 L Heavenly marriage/sex, Mk 12:25 (2012:30-36)
7 L Eunuchs for KG, Mat 19:12 (2012:436-44 = celibacy, not “the sexual profligacy of eunuchs”)
8 (Only L) Incest, Mk 6:17-18 John the Baptist to Herod (“presumably/very probable” that Jesus would agree; 2010:34; 2012:143)

#2-4 include heart’s motives; but no change regarding the sexual acts considered sinful: “The texts expand the notion of what is right and wrong in sexuality from acts to attitudes and intent” (2012:149)
#5 hyperbole regarding avoidance of sin; but no redefinition of sexual acts considered sinful
#6 the text eliminates patriarchal marriage in heaven but not sex
#7 eunuchs sexually active in a wide variety of ways but cannot reproduce

The supposed enhanced “strictness” on divorce can only be affirmed by ignoring the fact, as Loader shows, that no two biblical texts say the same thing (see Hanks 2000a/2008 → Mark, Appendix on Divorce). In a patriarchal tradition where both the dominant Greco-Roman cultures and the Judaisms emphasized marriage for procreation, the option of Jesus and Paul to prioritize remaining unmarried and avoiding procreation was anything but “conservative” (2010:64)! Would a conservative commend three types of eunuchs as paradigms of the new discipleship (Mat 19:12) or give prostitutes priority over religious leaders for entrance into God’s Dominion (Mat 21:31-32; see Hanks 2000a/2008:12-16)? Why draw “ethical” conclusions condemning prostitution, using Paul’s perplexing teaching on idolatrous foreign prostitutes in 2 Cor 6:14-16 (Loader 2012:222-26), rather than allow all the positive references to Rahab to have equal weight? (See 2.2 below; also the diversity regarding eunuchs and whether widows should remarry or not—1 Cor 7 vs. 1 Tim 5:14). And why allow a handful of negative but ambiguous “control texts” (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) to outweigh the strong, positive narrative texts on Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Jesus and the Beloved Disciple? Rarely do I differ with Loader’s exegetical conclusions, but attention to the history of homophobia and heterosexism leads me to construct a quite different forest from so many lovely trees.

2.2 Prostitutes As Loader recognizes, “In biblical law there was no direct prohibition against [males] having sexual relations with prostitutes. Some appear in the biblical story without disapproval, notably Rahab…and Tamar…. Increasingly, however, prostitution came to be looked upon with disapproval (Lev 19:29; Jer 5:7; Hos 4:14; 9:1)…. Both prophetic and priestly texts depict Israel as engaging in prostitution by developing liaisons with other gods while married to Yahweh (e.g. Hos 9:1; Exod 34:15-16; Lev 17:7; 20:5…[cf. Deut 23:17 MT with LXX])…. The warnings in Proverbs about the outsider woman focus primarily on the dangers of a seductive married woman (2:16-19; 5:3-20; 6:24-35; 7:6-27) who may be engaging in prostitution, like the foolish woman in 9:13-18)…. Given this negative stance towards prostitution, it is little wonder that NT writers
deplored prostitution” (Loader 2012:15-17; my emphasis). Note, however, Jesus’ friendship with “sinners” (which included prostitutes), as well as both the two emphatically positive Hebrew Bible texts on Rahab as well as the three NT texts on Rahab, “the prostitute” (see Jennings 2013; Hanks 2000/08; 2006; 2012):


- However, the author of Hebrews (11:30-31) commends Rahab as a paradigm of faith, but notably speaks of the miraculous fall of Jericho’s walls without even mentioning Joshua:
  
  “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, having been encircled for seven days; by faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies with peace, was not killed with those who were disobedient.”

Instead of naming Joshua, Hebrews prefers to focus on the faith of the people (the implicit subject, 11:30-31). The “peace” that the spies experienced, according to Hebrews, might well include a certain sexual relief (shalom, “well-being in every dimension”; → Song of Songs 8:10, → 1 Cor. 7:15). Notably, then, Rahab appears in three key texts in the New Testament, but Joshua, (the apparent hero of the Hebrew Bible book), only appears in one text, which is negative (Heb. 4:8)!

- James (2:25) refers to Rahab as paired equally with Abraham, as a paradigm of faith that becomes manifest in works (see DHHBE James 2:25 note, on Rahab’s faith):
  
  Was not even Rahab the prostitute [porne] considered just for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? (2:25—just after citing Abraham in 2:20-24!)

- In Matthew 1:5 Rahab is one of four women in Jesus’ genealogy (see also Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba), two of them gentiles and all representatives of sexual minorities (→ Mat 1:5; W. E. Davies y Dale Allison 1998:172-173, Matthew, ICC). According to Joshua, Rahab enjoyed a long life (Joshua 6:25, “until today”). Although Matthew does not recognize the late dates of the deuteronomistic editing of Joshua (7th and 6th centuries BCE), he also attributes to Rahab a miraculously long life, indicating that she married Salmon (1:5 [not Solomon]), who lived two centuries afterwards and that she was the mother of Boaz, great grandfather of King David (10th century).

2.3 Same-sex acts. Loader calls Rom 1:18-32 Paul’s rhetorical ploy (2010:13), using the phrase “caught out” for the “trap” metaphor (see David, who fell into Nathan’s trap; also Judah and Israel in Amos 1–2):

What follows in 2:1-16 dramatically turns attention back on the accusers who had been so appreciating Paul’s statements thus far. The way Paul’s rhetoric works at this point suggests that he expects some among his hearers to be caught out…. If the primary aim is to catch out those who had somehow set themselves above and beyond the Gentiles and depict all, Jews and Gentiles, as sinners (3:9), then one might wonder whether what Paul says of Gentiles is to be taken seriously at all or is just a ploy or a kind of role-play. In 1:18-32 Paul would then be role-playing the hypocrite of 2:1 and accordingly such hypocrisy, together with its claims, should be summarily dismissed, including alleged statements about same-sex relations….How do we determine what is rhetorical ploy from what Paul really means?” (Loader 2010:12-13; my emphasis).

Loader thus perceptively raises a key question stemming from Paul’s laying of his rhetorical trap in 1:18-32 (overlooked by most commentators). Loader’s conclusion is that “Paul is…engaging in a rhetorical ploy. He sets up those Christian Jews who would join his condemnation of Gentiles with glee, only to confront them in 2:1-16 with their own sin, but not in a way that he takes back anything he has said thus far about Gentiles” (13-14; my emphasis). I have argued, rather, that in setting his rhetorical trap in 1:18-32, Paul intentionally employs a series of ambiguous terms, which hypocritical judgmental readers will seize upon as they rush into his trap, while he, as the letter unfolds (2:1-16:27), proceeds to redefine and deconstruct the terminology and concepts of 1:18-32, revealing in the process a profounder dialectical theology (see Campbell 2010). Loader and earlier
commentators overlook this deconstruction process, but Loader does suggest the difficulty of any leap from rhetorical ploy to ethical absolutes (“what Paul really means”).

Despite such significant insights and qualifications, however, Loader makes clear his conclusion that in Romans 1 Paul considers all same-sex intercourse as a manifestation of a “disorder” comparable to idolatry and “a deliberate perversion of God’s intentions and their [human] nature….Without differentiation he condemns all such [same-sex] attitudes and desires and all acts which give expression to them” (2012:227, 326; Loader, of course, disagrees). Similarly, arsenokoiotai in 1 Cor 6:9-10 and 1 Tim 1:9-10 is best taken as “closely cohering with what Paul condemns in Romans 1 and reflecting the prohibitions of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 on which it appears to be built” (2012:331). Interpretations that propose positive acceptance of same-sex relations and acts in certain other texts are rejected, after brief citations of some of the alternative literature (2012:334-338).

2.4 Other Diversity. Other areas that Loader treats might similarly stress the diversity of teaching in the Biblical texts rather than the ethical unities he emphasizes (see Polygyny, Incest-Levirate, Eunuchs/Celibacy, Widows). Recent studies on violence in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Scriptures similarly acknowledge the great diversity of viewpoints expressed. See J. Harold Ellens, ed. (2007); Paul Copan (2011); feminist literature on Texts of Terror and gay/queer literature on the Clobber Texts.

3 What is “un/natural” according to Paul? (Loader 2010:23-28; 2012:91-99, 308-15; cf. James Brownson 223-255). As Brownson (2013) reminds us: “Nothing has been more central to the debates over homosexuality in the churches than Paul’s language regarding ‘nature’ in Romans 1….The importance of the references in this passage to ‘nature’ becomes evident when the recurring use of the language of ‘exchange’ is noted on Romans 1 [1:23, 25-26 + 27, men “giving up” intercourse with women]” (223). “The first place to look, in discerning the meaning of ‘nature’ for Paul, is Paul’s own use of this word elsewhere in Romans [11:24!] and in his other letters, as well as the word’s usage in the rest of the New Testament” (2013:226).

John Boswell first pointed out the significance for interpreting Paul’s rhetoric in 1:26-27 of even God’s own acting “against nature” in order to engraft Gentiles into the Jewish Olive Tree (God’s people, 11:24) (Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, 1980:112; William Countryman 1988:113-114; 2007:112-114; Helminiak 2000:80-86). Bernadette Brooten cited Helminiak’s reference to this double occurrences of para physis in Romans 1:26 and 11:24, but dismissed its significance as “methodologically problematic…because the two contexts differ so sharply” (1996:246, note 88). The dialectical contrast between the contexts, however, is precisely what empowers Paul’s deconstruction! Remarkably, even Robert Jewett ignored the fact that in Romans 1:26 and 11:24 Paul repeats “para phusin”, the only uses of the phrase in the entire New Testament (2007:172-76, 692-93), also ignored by Hultgren (2011:411) but clearly recognized although rejected by Loader: “Nor will it do to cite Paul’s reference to God’s grafting a branch of a wild olive tree onto a cultivated one as ‘contrary to nature’ (para phusin) (Rom 11:24) as justification for implying that God might approve the actions contrary to nature in 1:26-27, of which he clearly disapproves” (2012:312). As in his earlier treatment of un/natural (2010), however, Loader fails to take into account that Paul’s rhetorical trap in Rom 1:18-32 purposefully employs ambiguous terminology, preparing for his later deconstructions of the ambiguous terms as the letter develops and the trap is repeatedly sprung (Hanks 2000/08:92; 2011:105-108). Moreover, the fact that Paul later in his letter explicitly echoes two terms (“un/clean” 1:24 14:14, 20; “against nature” 1:26 11:24) clearly indicates his awareness of their ambiguity in his laying of his rhetorical trap in 1:24-27 and his intentional use and later deconstruction of these terms (in addition to the dishonor/shame crucifixion deconstruction; 1:24, 26-27 3:25; 1:16) when he repeatedly springs his rhetorical trap as Romans unfolds.

Note. In Rom 1: 24-27 does Paul condemn males for acting as females? Loader (2010:11-29) says “such shame could refer to a man being made to take a female role, in particular, in sexual intercourse” (2010:16; see “The shamefulness and disgrace when a man is feminized and a woman usurps male position,” 29). In 2012 Loader refers to “shame, which goes beyond the shame of sin to include the shame of men behaving as women or having others do so” (2012:227; see 316-19). Likewise, Brownson explains: “For a man, to be penetrated is to be inherently degraded—that is, to be forced to act like a woman instead of a man” (2013:82, citing the offer of females substitutes to be raped in both Gen 19 and Judges 19). Similarly, in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 “The
wording itself suggests that *treating a man as if he were a woman* is the core problem” (83). And “what is degrading and shameless about the behavior described in Romans 1:24-27 is that it is driven by excessive, self-seeking lust, that it knows no boundaries or restraints, and that it violates established gender roles of that time and culture, understood in terms of masculine rationality and honor” (2013:219). In both 1 Cor 11:13-14 (hair length) and Rom 1:24-27 “we see a blurring of gender distinctions and the confusion of gender roles,” behavior that is both dishonorable and “a violation of nature” (236). This undoubtedly reflects the patriarchal prejudices of Paul’s readers in Rome, but fails to account for the fact that in Rom 1:18-32 he is laying his rhetorical trap for them and that Paul himself elsewhere challenges such patriarchal sexism (65-71, expounding Gal 3:27-28; see also Paul’s eschatological perspective, 248-55; and Rom 16).

In his earlier treatment of Paul’s phrase “against/beyond nature” (*para phusin*, 1:26) Loader pointed out that the Apostle introduces terminology deriving from Greek philosophy rather than biblical theology (the Hebrew Bible and Jesus avoided such terminology, preferring to refer to God as creator and to concrete examples of the creation): “The connection between what Gentiles saw as the natural world and what Paul saw as the creation, on the one hand, and its Creator on the other, is explicit in 1:18-23, and clear in 1:25 with the charge that they worship the creature rather than the Creator” (2010:27; Note. Since “nature/supernatural” are not biblical, but neoplatonic/Stoic concepts, to defend “Supernatural Christianity” is to defend neoplatonism; cf. Paul’s “signs and wonders, Rom 15:19; Jesus’ exorcisms, healings, “signs”). Loader, however, fails to mention that elsewhere in the New Testament humans are expected to *transcend* irrational natural animal behavior (→ Jude 10; deceptively translated “instinct” in the NIV and NRSV) and that many studies reveal what a slippery term “nature/natural” is in the history of human ideologies and philosophies (Hanks 2000/08:244-45, citing details from Volker Sommer, *Wider die Natur: Homosexualität und Evolution*, 1990).

Unlike Loader (2010:24; 2012:91-99), James Brownson (2013) “proceeds with the assumption that the first place to look, in discerning the meaning of ‘nature’ for Paul, is Paul’s own use of this word elsewhere in Romans and in his other letters, as well as the word’s usage in the rest of the New Testament” (226). “In modern understanding, what is natural stands directly opposite to what is social. Nature refers to biology—over against culture. ‘Contrary to nature’ means ‘contrary to biological structures and processes’ rather than ‘contrary to the good order of society.’” Modern people generally conceive of the natural world as what exists prior to and apart from human influence, either individual or social. This sort of dichotomous thinking between the natural and the social simply did not exist in the ancient world….Living in accordance with biological nature and living in accordance with other humans in an ordered society were conceived of as two sides of the same coin” (232-33). “Attention is often focused on…1 Corinthians 11:14-15: ‘Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.’ Here ‘nature’ appears very much like ‘social convention’” (234). Brownson thus summarizes (2013:255): “In the ancient world there were three dimensions to the understanding of nature, and we find each of these reflected in Paul’s use of the word:

1. Nature was understood as one’s **individual nature or disposition**: Paul’s language in Romans 1 thus reflects the ancient notion that same-sex eroticism was driven by an insatiable thirst for the exotic by those who were not content with ‘natural’ desires for the same sex….

2. Nature was also understood as what contributed to the **good order of society** as a whole. In this sense, it looks very much like social convention, and many ancient understandings of what is natural, particularly those concerning gender roles, seem quaint at best to us today.

3. Nature was also understood in the ancient world in relationship to **biological processes, particularly procreation**: Paul’s reference to sexual misbehavior in Romans 1:24-27 as ‘unnatural’ spring in part from their nonprocreative character. Yet there is no evidence that people in the ancient world linked natural gender roles more specifically to the complementary sexual organs of male and female, apart from a general concern with the ‘naturalness’ of procreation.

Thus, “Paul envisions the sexual misbehavior he describes in Romans 1:26-27 as [1] a violation of one’s individual nature or identity, [2] as a violation of deeply established social norms regarding gender, and [3] as a violation of the ‘biological imperative’ to bear children. All of this is conveyed in his characterization of these behaviors as ‘unnatural’” (Brownson 2013:246).
Then twice in Rom 2 Paul immediately begins to deconstruct “against nature” (para phusis, 1:26). In Rom 2:27, by referring to Gentiles as uncircumcised “by nature,” Paul identified circumcision itself, a human cultural imposition, as an act “against nature” (though commanded by God); note also the Gentiles not having the Law “by nature” (= from birth, 2:14; see below). As commentators recognize, Paul refers to nature (phusis) in its most common meaning in 2:27, when he refers to the Gentiles as those who are “not circumcised by nature.” Even Gagnon admits that Paul in effect says that the cutting of the foreskin in the act of circumcision is an act “against nature” (2001:372, note 34)—and hence when God commanded Abraham to circumcise his male offspring and slaves, he was commanding them to undertake an act “against nature” (Gen 17). The NIV, rushing to protect evangelical readers from straying into such heresy, disguises Paul’s deconstruction process by translating “by nature” as “physically” (2:27), so the reader misses the link Paul established with the phrase “against nature” in 1:26 and 11:24. However, as evangelical Tom Wright points out, “All males are ‘naturally uncircumcised’ in the sense that they are born that way” (⇒ “Romans” NIB 2002: 448, note 73). He concludes that, except for the reference to an abstract nature in 1 Cor 11:14 (male and female hair length; see below), all the other Pauline usages refer to the status people have by birth or race (even Rom 1:26). In addition, the even earlier and more ambiguous text (Rom 2:14) is best translated: “For whenever Gentiles who do not possess Torah by nature (phusei, = birth) the things of the Torah do, these, though not having the Torah, are a law to themselves” (cf. the NIV “do by nature,” instead of “Gentiles by nature” in 2:14). Two recent evangelical commentators recognize that Paul uses “by nature” in the same sense (“by birth”) in both Rom 2:14 and 27 (Schreiner 1998:123; Wright 2002:441-42; earlier Cranfield; pace Gagnon 2001:371, note 32). Moreover, Wright points out that Paul always uses phusis in an adjectival phrase (“Gentiles by nature,” 2:14), not adverbially (“by nature do”); 1996/2001:145, citing Paul Achtemeier 1985:45).

Loader (in 2010) also treated Paul’s problematic reference to “nature” in 1 Cor 11:13-14: “Paul employs the word physis, ‘nature’ elsewhere to describe the way things are and the right order of things in much the same way as did the philosophers of his time, whose language and terms he is employing. This is even true of his statement in 1 Corinthians 11:13-14 that for men to have long hair is unnatural. We might define that as cultural convention, as Helminiak proposes also for Romans [note 59 2000:85-86], but [William] Schoedel argues that Paul sees natural as proper, the way nature and creation was meant to be” [2010:24; note 60, citing Schoedel 2000:59-63]. What Helminiak proposed, of course, was simply to take the commonly recognized meaning of “nature” (= culture) in 1 Cor 11:14 as applicable to Romans 1:26 (Hanks ⇒ 1 Cor, commentaries of G. Fee 1987:526-27; A. Thielson 2006:176-77; 2000:844-48; David Garland 2003:530). Loader’s treatment here obscures what most recognize as the diversity—or better “breadth”—of meaning” in the rhetoric of Paul’s terminology of un/natural (Loader 2010:23-24; 2012:312; cf. Brownson 2013:232-34, cited above).

Regarding Rom 11:24 William Countryman observes: “The inclusion of the Gentiles in the Christian community represents a break with the preceding order of things as substantial as God’s handing over of the Gentiles to their unclean culture…The constant, in both cases, is an assumption that there was a clear Gentile identity that God has altered not once, but twice: first in punishing the Gentile foundational sin of idolatry, and now, a second time, in incorporating Gentiles in the Christian community for reasons entirely of God’s own grace. Both acts were ‘unnatural’ acts” (2003:196; see also p. 174; Gagnon 2001:390-91, note 68). Similarly, Eugene Rogers emphasized that in 11:24 Paul deconstructs his rhetoric about sexual acts “against nature,” affirming that God himself acted “in excess of nature” by grafting unclean Gentile branches into the pure olive tree (Israel). This action, transcending “nature,” was to be celebrated (Rom 11:32-36; 15:7-13), not condemned: “Gentiles are so foreign to the God of Israel that Paul can say that God acts ‘contraary to nature,’ para phusin, in grafting them in. A phrase more liable to provoke…is difficult to imagine. Does Paul mean to compare God’s activity to homosexual activity?” (Rogers 1999:64). Elizabeth Stuart concludes: “Paul’s use of this phrase in Romans 11:24 is shocking considering his previous use of the phrase earlier in this letter to describe, not homosexual people, but Gentiles who characteristically engage in same-sex activity, a characteristic that distinguishes them, not from heterosexuals, but from Jews… Paul is making the outrageous claim that God stands in solidarity with these Gentiles; God like them acts against, or more accurately, in excess of nature” (2003:96). Rogers concludes that just as God saved flesh by taking it on in the incarnation and defeated death by dying (Rom 8:3, 11), so God saves Gentiles, who act in excess of nature (Rom 1:26-27), by his own act in excess of nature (Rom 11:24; Rogers 1999:65, cited, Stuart 2003:96).
Loader, however, follows Gagnon, who speculated that Paul would have in mind as the primary argument from nature the complementarity of human sexual genitalia: the penis fits the vagina, an appeal to visual observation as in 1:19-23. To support this proposal he notes [Craig] Williams’ observation that “some kind of argument from ‘design’ seems to lurk in the background of Cicero’s, Seneca’s, and Musonius’ claims: the penis is ‘designed’ to penetrate the vagina, the vagina is ‘designed’ to be penetrated by the penis” (Loader 2010:24). Of course, where intention to procreate is absent, one could also argue that the penis is ‘designed’ to fit in the hand, mouth or anus and thus give similar pleasure! More perceptively, Douglas Campbell argues that one of the “intrinsic difficulties” in such traditional Justification Theory interpretations of Romans is Natural Revelation that “builds from the objective discernment and lineage of certain positions within creation—a universal recognition and derivation that, in strictly rational terms, is impossible….theism ⇒ monotheism ⇒ divine transcendence/unimageability ⇒ divine retributive justice ⇒ divine concern for human heterosexuality ⇒ and monogamy ⇒ divine concern for a fuller ethical system…. Such attributes and concerns cannot be shown to derive in strictly rational terms from the bland god of the philosophers. How do we deduce, by contemplating the cosmos, that a single transcendent god is offended by homosexuality?” (2009:39-45). As Ted Jennings emphasizes, Paul (like Jesus, Mat 19:12, Lk 14:26, 18:29) counsels his disciples to avoid marriage and procreation (1 Cor 7:7-8, 32-35; Jennings 2009:131-38). Instead of such “natural” procreative sex (abandoned in Rom 1:26-27 and never practiced or recommended by Paul), the aim of the Apostle to the Gentiles is to “harvest much fruit” (1:13; cf. John 15:1-17) in winning more Gentiles to the faith, who are then engrafted by God “against nature” into the Olive Tree (God’s people; Rom 11:11-24).

As Brownson points out: “For Gagnon, what ‘nature’ teaches most centrally about sex is ‘the anatomical fittedness of the male penis and the female vagina….Gagnon argues that [Rom 1:19-20] focuses on what is visible, or ‘plain’.….[However] when we consider Paul’s other uses of the word ‘nature,’ it does not appear that he focuses particularly on the visible aspects of nature. For example, Paul speaks in Romans 11:24 of wild olive branches that, contrary to nature, are grafted [by God] into a cultivated olive tree. It is hard to see how this text focuses on visual elements with any particular emphasis at all” (2013:241-42). “In Romans 11:24, God acts ‘contrary to nature’ by grafting the (Gentile) wild olive branches into what is ‘by nature’ a cultivated (Jewish) olive tree” (248). “The biblical vision of a new creation invites us to imagine what living into a deeper vision of ‘nature’….might look like under the guidance and power of he Spirit of God. This might also entail the cultivation of a vision for how consecrated and committed gay and lesbian relationships might fit into such a new order.” (2013:255). Note: Unlike so many commentators (Jewett 2007), Brownson in his argument makes use of the unique parallel expressions in Rom 1:26-27 ⇒ 11:24; however he fails to signal the significance of Paul’s multiple deconstruction of this and other key pejorative elements in Rom 1:24-27 (uncleanness, dishonor, change). Arland Hultgren (2011:96) also recognized that later in Romans Paul refers even to God as acting “against/beyond nature” (11:23-24) but failed to see the significance for the interpretation of Rom 1:26-27 as involving intentionally ambiguous terms, which are later deconstructed .

4. Complementarity, 16-38; Brownson critiques Gagnon on “complementarity” (16-38, 80-1, 122; cf Loader 2012:27-28). In his exegesis of the relevant texts, Robert Gagnon’s most common tactic has been to grant what pro-Gay scholars have pointed out about a text (interpretations that would tend to undermine the validity of its use against sexual minorities today), but then “trump the trick” by uncritically imposing his concept of “complementarity” and thus seek to reenlist the text to support traditional heterosexist conclusions. Regarding such tactics, Mary Ann Tolbert observes: “What exactly complementarity might mean for that [male and female] relationship is rarely touched on or explained….Being clear about the meaning of complementarity would almost surely lose popularity for the term and the idea behind it” (2006:176-77, note 13).

4.1 The Traditionalist Case and Its Problems). In fact, Gagnon’s concept of gender “complementarity” is a product of 18th-19th century romanticism, strongly fortified in the late 19th century by the “economic changes associated with early capitalism and industrialization” (Kathy Rudy 1997:117)—something Gagnon anachronistically reads back into biblical texts, where gender relations were assumed to be hierarchical, not complementary: “Anne Bathurst Gilson identifies the foundations of complementarity in a wide range of ethicists from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, including Anders Nygren, Helmut Thielicke, C.S. Lewis, and D. S. Baily (1995, cited in Rudy 1997:152-53, note 19; see also Karl Barth, below).
Without referring to Gagnon’s works (2001; 2003) that make the purported “complementarity” of male-female heterosexual relations the lynchpin to interpreting Biblical teaching on sexuality—and particularly for condemning all same-sex relations—similarly, Diana Swancutt also emphasized that such a concept of “complementarity” is quite modern, developing only in the 19th century and replacing traditional patriarchal, hierarchical ideologies of male superiority: “Ancients did not interpret Rom 1:18-32 as an exegesis of Gen 1-3 representing the ‘natural complementarity between women and men’ as moderns understand it. Complementarity [construed as]...a ‘natural’ compatibility between men and women that extends beyond procreation (the ancient view) into other realms such as work and social intercourse, is a modern concept born in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American discussions of women working outside the home” (2003:207, note 30; citing A. Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, Oxford: Oxford University, 1982; and R. Rosenberg, Beyond Separate Spheres, New Haven: Yale University, 1982).

Gagnon thus reads back into biblical texts his modern cultural concept of gender “complementarity” (a product of 18th-19th century romanticism), whereas in the ancient patriarchal cultures gender relations were assumed to be hierarchical, not complementary. Aside from the anatomical fit for procreation (now usually thwarted “against nature”), gender “complementarity” is only hierarchical, not complementary. Aside from the anatomical fit for procreation (the ancient view) into other realms such as work and social intercourse, is a modern concept born in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American discussions of women working outside the home” (2003:207, note 30; citing A. Kessler-Harris, Out to Work, Oxford: Oxford University, 1982; and R. Rosenberg, Beyond Separate Spheres, New Haven: Yale University, 1982).


- “An analysis of the form of moral logic underlying most traditionalist positions shows that what traditionalists find most fundamentally wrong with same-sex intimate relationships is that they violate divinely intended gender complementarity [as in Robert Gagnon 2001; 2003].
- But ‘gender complementarity’ is really more like a category under which a variety of forms of moral logic may appear. Some of these more specific forms, such as hierarchy [Gen. 3:16b] are not universally embraced among traditionalists as the deep meaning of gender complementarity.
- The most widely embraced form of gender complementarity among traditionalists focuses on the anatomical or biological complementarity of male and female [16-25]. The physical union of male and female in this view represents the overcoming of the incompleteness of the male on his own or the female on her own. [for many the rulership of husbands over wives represents “the essence” of complementaricy]
- But this hypothesis raises a deeper question: Is anatomical or biological gender complementarity what Scripture assumes and teaches? The central issue here is the interpretation of the creation of woman in Genesis 2.
- In response to…traditionalist readings of Gen 2, this chapter…argued the following countertheses [26-34]:
  1. The original ‘adam of Genesis 1:26-2:18 is not a binary or sexually undifferentiated being that is divided into male and female in Genesis 2:21.
  2. The focus in Genesis 2 is not on the complementarity of male and female but on the similarity of male and female [the animals brought for Adam to name were different; hence potentially complementary!].
  3. The fact that male and female are both created in the divine image (Gen. 1:27) is intended to convey the value, dominion and relationality that is shared by both men and women, but not the idea that the complementarity of the genders is somehow necessary to fully express or embody the divine image [pace Karl Barth; in the NT Jesus = God’ image: 2 Cor 4:4; 1 Cor 15:45; Col 3:19, p. 32].
  4. The one-flesh union spoken of in Genesis 2:24 connotes not physical complementarity but a kinship bond.
- These countertheses demonstrate that Genesis 2 does not teach a normative form of gender complementarity, based on the biological differences between male and female. Therefore, this form of moral logic cannot be assumed as the basis for the negative treatment of same-sex relationships in biblical texts. Hence we need to look further to discern why Scripture says what it does about same-sex intimate relationships” (37-38).
is 2:24 exposed the core form of moral logic that underlies the problem with oneness with another.

Sin is uniquely body person assumption that sexual intercourse actually changes people by blood [1 Cor 7:4]….[Paul’s reference to one’s own body refers to the Christian’s body and “is based on the sarx of the act of sexual intercourse in creating the Hebrew focuses particularly on the creation of kinship, Paul, following the LXX focuses more on the effects preceding statements and its basis, Gen 2:24….Here Paul cites the LXX eis sarka mian (“one flesh”). While the Hebrew focuses particularly on the creation of kinship, Paul, following the LXX focuses more on the effects of the act of sexual intercourse in creating hen soma (“one body”). The use of soma “body” here rather than sarx (“flesh”), reflects Paul’s emphasis on the power relation created, which is something more than flesh and blood [1 Cor 7:4]….[Paul’s reference to one’s own body refers to the Christian’s body and “is based on the assumption that sexual intercourse actually changes people by creating a new reality: oneness with another person]; cf. B.N. Fisk: ‘Body Violation,’ commenting on the use of Gen 2:24, who notes that for Paul: ‘sexual sin is uniquely body-defiling because it is inherently body-joining’ (556).

5 Methodology. Especially when interpreting Paul, although Loader’s common point of departure with Philo obviously is relevant and well done, I believe it’s misleading to give Philo such methodological priority, rather than making Paul himself (especially all he says in Romans) the basic starting point. Margaret Mitchell maintains that most analyses which have “depended with too much certainty on presumed historical factors have tended to downplay Paul’s own creative role in fashioning his letter of response” (1991:189-90, cited in Robert von Thaden, *Sex, Christ, and Embodied Cognition: Paul’s Wisdom for Corinth,* Deo, 2012:16). This is precisely the concern I voiced in my review of Robert Jewett (2007) and also in my QBC chapter on Romans. Although Loader gives much more attention to certain details in Paul that Jewett neglects, to make Philo the starting point leaves Paul expressing a weak echo rather than with his own strong, unique creative voice. Can we imagine Philo writing—as Paul subversively does in Rom 11:21-24—that God himself acted “against nature”?! Reviewing the data on Philo only makes me wonder whether he, like Paul, was not a closeted homosexual with interiorized homophobia (all his detailed and appreciative observations of the “gay scene” in his day look very suspicious). And the apparent absence of any data about a wife or descendants might be quite significant, as many of us think it is in Paul’s case (→ Hanks 2007a/12, Appendix 3; John Spong 1991:116-26).

Brownson insists: “Paul’s approach to ‘nature’…stands in marked contrast to the approach we find in Jewish writers like Philo, Josephus, and Pseudo-Phocylides. In these…writers, ‘nature’ becomes synonymous with ‘the will of God revealed in the creation accounts and the rest of the law’ [cf. above Loader; Gagnon]. However, for Paul, the death of Christ forced a radical rereading of the law itself and its significance in the redeemed life….The way forward is not found by a return to a pristine, original nature—or even by more focused attempts to keep the whole law—but rather by following the crucified Messiah, who is ushering in a new creation, empowered by the Spirit of God” (249-50). “Christians may celebrate the way in which….‘queer’ folk can naturally deconstruct the pervasive tendencies of majority voices to become oppressive and exclusionary. In this vision, the inclusion of committed gay and lesbian unions represents not an accommodation to a sexually broken world, but rather an offbeat redemptive purpose in the new creation” (2013:253).

Loader’s works quite amply document the diversity characteristic of the biblical texts on sexuality and their related cultures, but too often his comments regarding the ethical conclusions of the biblical authors—not to be equated with Loader’s own—he permits that traditional religious “majority propaganda” dictate that Judaism, Jesus and Paul be represented above all by Lev 18:22 and 20:13. Such prejudice often is reflected in the elite male written sources cited (Philo, Josephus), but I suspect that the perspectives of ordinary (illiterate) folk are better reflected in → Song of Songs, the only canonical book dedicated to the theme of erotic love, both outside the framework of marriage and—like Paul and Jesus—with no interest in procreation! Ignoring the growing scholarly literature to the contrary, Loader also denies homoeroticism in the narratives of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Jesus and the Beloved Disciple. Hence our need to employ a more canonical theology to interpret the familiar negative proof texts (Romans 1 interpreted as a mere echo of Leviticus 18 and 20).

Susannah Cornwall writes: “I am sympathetic to [Ken Stone’s] position that it might be salient actively to seek out deviant texts and ‘countertexts’ such as the Song of Songs in order to proactively show a multiplicity of voices and positions as co-existing there [in the Bible]” (2011:65). Similarly, Chip Dobbs-Allsopp comments: “The project of reading Song of Songs toward specifically ethical ends is a wonderfully open project that awaits only the decision to put these age-old love poems into conversation with the moral issues of the day”
(2011:743). Of course commentaries on Song of Songs have long worked to mine alternative perspectives for sexual ethics, which commonly are ignored by biblical “sexual ethics” specialists. Ariel and Chana Bloch (in their “commentary of commentaries,” The Song of Songs) even create a dichotomy between the Hebrew Bible and the purported “antipathy to sexuality in the New Testament” (1995:11). However, if we read Jesus and Paul in continuity with Song of Songs rather than presuppose their conformity to neoplatonic sex-body negativism (soon echoed in patristic writers), we get a very different picture. That Jesus and Paul remained unmarried, exhorted various types of “eunuchs” (Mat. 19:12) and sometimes defended women against patriarchal prejudices need not imply that they were sexually inactive or opposed to all physical expressions of sexuality including homoeroticism (1 Cor 7). If—instead of using a few negative biblical verses to function as “control texts”—we employ the positive → Song of Songs as the basis for a canonical reading of the negative texts a radically different picture emerges. Loader prefaces his treatment of Romans 1:24, 26-27 commenting on the purported influence of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, explaining that Paul was influenced by “[1] his Jewish biblical heritage and 2] from contemporary Jewish and [3] Graeco-Roman discussions” (2010:28b-29). Notably, however, the canon of Paul’s “Jewish biblical heritage” seems strangely limited to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (2012:320).

**Conclusion.** One of the strengths of Loader’s interpretation of such texts as Romans 1:24, 26-27 as implying condemnation of all same-sex acts is the parallel he perceives with the Biblical “texts of terror” referring to women. Loader points out that, although evangelical feminists can cite exegetical data that greatly lessens the offense of many patriarchal texts, other texts (especially 1 Cor 11:2-16), so clearly assume and/or teach female inferiority that they must be interpreted with a hermeneutic that recognizes this pre-scientific limitation (2010:24-25, 56-59, 2012:368-83). Brownson’s work, profoundly impacted by the discovery that he has a gay son, is a highly commendable effort, to convince traditionalist Christians (like many in his own denomination, the Reformed Church of America), that they can maintain their faith in Biblical authority while welcoming those gays and lesbians who live according to the norms for sexual ethics he believes are biblical requirements for all. However, this overriding concern—to establish a Biblically based sexual ethics applicable to all—perhaps leads him to interpret some of the texts on sexual minorities in ways that fail to do justice to the diversity of perspectives in the Bible (on prostitutes, see above 2.2  on Rahab, etc.).

**Note 1.** Brownson on sexual ethics for all 251, 276f-8. “Some…concerns clearly transcend their particular cultural setting and continue to serve as forms of moral logic that should shape Christian moral frameworks today. This is particularly true with concerns about [1] rape and other forms of sexual violence [2] concerns about pederasty [3] sexual slavery and other forms of nonmutual, short-term sexual behaviors, [4] as well as those concerns that focus on excessive lust and prostitution” (276). “The evidence suggests that there are no forms of moral logic undermining these passages [the 7 clobber texts] and that clearly and unequivocally forbid all contemporary forms of committed same-sex intimate relationships. This is particularly clear when these contemporaneous relationships are not [1] lustful [2] or dishonoring to one’s partner, [3] are marked positively by moderated and disciplined desire, [4] and when intimacy in these relationships contributed to the establishment of lifelong bonds of kinship, care, and mutual concern” (277).

**Note 2.** Gaca, Kathy L. (2003). The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity [Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press]. (“[S]tagering erudition,” Chris Frilingos, Review JBL 123/4 2004:756-759). Gaca concludes that for Paul, based not on Greek philosophy or popular culture but on his reading of the LXX, fornication [poreia] implies heterosexual relations in a context of idolatrous religion and worship. “Polytheistic religion in antiquity was intimately connected with sexual and procreative conduct, for people worshipped gods embodying sexual power, such as Aphrodite, Dionysus, Hera, and Zeus” (2003:3). Since Hellenistic culture accepted prostitution/poreia, the term was not included in its vice lists; Jesus, addressing fellow Jews in Palestine, had little occasion to refer to poreia; but Paul, addressing non-Jews elsewhere, made it a major concern: “Paul’s cardinal dictate [is] that God’s people must avoid sexual fornication in worship of other gods” (2003:14). “The vice of poreia is entirely absent from the [vice] lists in Hellenistic philosophy, but occurs frequently and near the beginning of the Pauline lists, Gal 5:19-21; Col 3:5; 1 Cor 12:20-21, Eph 5:3-5” (2003:14, note 38); rare (twice) in Jesus’ teaching (2003:13 note 36, 139 note 52; see Matt. 5:32 // 19:9; 15:19 // Mark 7:21). However, fornication/poreia in Paul, following the LXX, is “a heterosexual deviance” and does not refer to homoeotic acts (2003:143, 158). “Biblical poreia refers to acts of sexual intercourse and reproduction that deviate from the norm of worshipping God alone…. In the non-biblical Greek sense, however, poreia means ‘prostitution and has nothing to do with worshipping God alone” (2003:20).
General Bibliography Cited


