

Romans 1 and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of James Brownson's Bible, Gender, Sexuality

PRESTON M. SPRINKLE
ETERNITY BIBLE COLLEGE

In the flurry of recent books about homosexuality and the Bible, James Brownson's Bible, Gender, Sexuality offers a very convincing defense of same-sex marriage. However, Brownson makes several historical assumptions that are inaccurate, which end up working against his thesis. For instance, contrary to Brownson, the ancient world did hold to a form of sexual orientation and there are examples of peer homosexual relationships. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that Paul only had excessively immoral same-sex relationships in his mind when he penned Romans 1.

Key Words: homosexuality, Romans, Paul, Greco-Roman, same-sex marriage, Hellenistic Judaism, sexuality, sexual orientation

A GAME-CHANGING BOOK

James Brownson's recent book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* is, according to one endorser, "a 'game changing' book on the hotly disputed topic of same-sex orientation and relationships in light of the Bible."¹ Most people familiar with this debate agree. Wesley Hill believes that Brownson's work "will be the new 'go-to' book for Christians wishing to make a case for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church."² Wesley Granberg-Michaelson praises Brownson for taking "the Bible seriously, engaging it faithfully and deeply," and ultimately showing that the traditional view against same-sex relations has misunderstood the passages

1. J. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). The endorsement on the back cover is from Brian McLaren.

2. W. Hill, "Gunning for Complementarity," *The Living Church* (June 7, 2013). On-line: <http://livingchurch.org/gunning-complementarity>.

that speak to this issue.³ No one interested in this debate should neglect Brownson's valuable contribution.

In this review, I will summarize the main argument of the book and then point out several problems within Brownson's argument; in particular, I will address his assumptions about the moral logic underlying Paul's evaluation of same-sex intercourse in Romans 1.

GENDER COMPLIMENTARITY

Brownson's central thesis is that traditionalists⁴ have wrongly assumed that the moral logic underlying heterosexual marriage has to do with the "gender complementarity" of men and women. According to Brownson,

Traditionalists all point to gender complementarity as the central form of moral logic that undergirds what they believe to be the Bible's universal rejection of same-sex erotic relationships. These relationships are "against nature," and "nature" is further explained as the complementarity of the genders. (p. 21)⁵

Men and women, in other words, possess biological and anatomical differences that necessarily complement each other in marital and sexual union. Gay and lesbian unions are thereby ruled out—according to traditionalists.

Brownson contends that Gen 1–2 does not support the traditionalists' position. For instance, when Genesis says that God will make "a helper corresponding to him" (Gen 2:18 cf. v. 20), it was not Eve's gender complementarity but her anthropological similarity that qualified their matrimony. Eve was a human, not an animal, and therefore she was "corresponding to" Adam. Moreover, Adam and Eve's "one flesh" union highlights their kinship bond, not the anatomical complement of their sexual organs. Therefore, "appeals to a doctrine of physical or biological gender complementarity grounded in the creation narratives do not illuminate the moral logic by which Pauline and other biblical texts condemn same-sex erotic relations" (p. 35). There is nothing in Gen 1–2 that precludes the possibility of same-sex unions expressing the similarity and kinship necessary for holy matrimony.

Based on this central claim, Brownson argues extensively against the moral logic thought to support the traditional view of marriage. He shows that Scripture does not exhibit a uniform picture of marital hierarchy, whereby the man *as a male* fills a certain leadership role in marriage, while the woman *as a female* occupies the role of submissive helpmate. Brownson shows that "the New Testament's seemingly patriarchal injunctions can be understood as various attempts to rein in imbalances in the 'already/

3. Brownson, forward to *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, vii–xi.

4. The term *traditionalist* refers to those who say the Bible prohibits all forms of homoerotic activity and the term "revisionist" refers to those who argue the Bible does not condemn consensual, loving, homoerotic activity in the context of a monogamous relationship.

5. Throughout this article, page numbers in parentheses refer to Brownson's *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*.

not yet' tension of New Testament Eschatology" (p. 71). When Paul commands wives to submit to their husbands, or when Peter enjoins women to call their husbands "Lord," they are expressing the residue of the old creation. But breaking into the old are egalitarian assumptions about the new creation, where "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). "When viewed in a comprehensive canonical context," Brownson writes, "hierarchy or patriarchy cannot be construed to be the essence of a normative 'gender complementarity' that is allegedly violated by same-sex unions" (p. 81).

Of course, not every traditionalist advocates for such gender hierarchical roles in marriage. This is why Brownson goes on to argue against other traditional assumptions about marriage thought to proscribe homosexual unions. As suggested earlier, the concept of "one flesh" points to a kinship bond (which, in theory, could include homosexual couples) rather than biological complementarity. Also, the possibility of procreation, which according to some traditionalists validates marital and sexual union, is not a primary concern in the most significant passages about marriage: Gen 2, Song of Songs, and 1 Cor 7. Moreover, neither Jesus nor Paul sanctions marriage or sexual union based on its procreative potential (pp. 116–18). Brownson then argues against the idea that people attracted to the same sex should remain celibate, as traditionalists say. Jesus says that celibacy is only for those who can accept it (Matt 19:11–12), not to be imposed on people who cannot accept it. And Paul argues explicitly that unless one has the gift of celibacy, they should marry rather than burn with sexual lust. Still, many gay and lesbian Christians—who admittedly *do not* have the gift—are told they should remain celibate, *against* Paul's explicit command that they should marry.

One wonders whether Paul had gay people in mind when he penned 1 Cor 7, or whether he would want his words to be applied to the modern-day debate about homosexuality. In any case, Brownson forces his readers to consider, or reconsider, the biblical support often cited for the traditionalist position.

The last 100 pages of the book looks at Rom 1:24–27, the Bible's main passage about homoeroticism, through four angles: (1) lust and desire, (2) purity and impurity, (3) honor and shame, and (4) nature (pp. 146–255). Paul clearly prohibits same sex relations, but *which kinds* of relations did he have in mind? And what is the moral logic lurking behind Paul's critique? Can we take Paul's words and apply them to committed, consensual, monogamous same-sex relations today? Brownson says no. Paul prohibits homosexual intercourse because it lacks procreative potential, it feminizes the passive partner, and it violates the personal nature (or disposition) of the participant. In his conclusion, Brownson briefly looks at other passages that mention homosexual relations: Gen 19, Judg 19, Lev 18:22 and 20:13, 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:10. Like Rom 1, none of passages address consensual and monogamous gay and lesbian relations.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

I agree with Wesley Hill's conclusion that Brownson's work will be *the* go-to book for those who dispute a traditional reading, and I commend Brownson for producing a well-researched and clearly written argument for the revisionist's position. However, there are several problems in his exegesis of Rom 1 that have not been adequately addressed by previous reviewers. I will begin with two of Brownson's assumptions about Paul's moral logic underlying his prohibition of same-sex intercourse in Rom 1.

PROCREATIVE POTENTIAL

According to Brownson, "because same-sex relationships are nonprocreative, Paul regarded these relationships as selfish and socially irresponsible, neglecting the obligation of procreation" (p. 267; cf. pp. 244–45). This applies to Rom 1:27, where male-male sex is deemed "unnatural," and also to Rom 1:26, which, according to Brownson, refers not to lesbian sex but to nonprocreative forms of heterosexual sex (anal sex, oral sex, and so on).

If Brownson is correct, then the implications for same-sex relations are clear. If Paul believed that procreative potential validates sex thus ruling out homosexual relations, then should we still take Paul's words *along with the moral logic of those words* as authoritative? If we say yes, then this would rule out all forms of non-coitus heterosexual sex and the use of contraceptives for heterosexual relations as well. And if we follow Paul's logic all the way, Rom 1 would also condemn sex in old age, vasectomies, and any other sexual activity that lacks procreative potential. But if we say that Paul's beliefs about sex-for-procreation are not authoritative—a relic of his Jewish past—then we cannot rule out homosexual sex for its lack of procreative potential. Once we remove the moral logic of Paul's proscription, we reconfigure the proscription itself.

But contrary to Brownson, procreation does not play a role in Paul's moral logic. Brownson is correct in his reconstruction of Paul's cultural milieu and the high priority it placed on procreation. For instance, several Jewish and Greco-Roman writers condemn homosexual sex for its lack of procreative potential. Josephus says that "the Law recognizes no sexual connections, except the natural (*kata physin*) union of man and wife, and that only for the procreation of children" (*Ag. Ap.* 2:199). Philo says that God gave "the natural desire of men and women for a connection together, for the sake of producing children" (*Abr.* 137). Plato, at least in his *Laws*, agrees: "the sexual pleasure experienced by the female and male natures when they join together for the purpose of procreation seems to have been handed down in accordance with nature" (*Laws* 636B–D; 838).⁶ Brownson

6. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Greco-Roman literature are from Thomas K. Hubbard, ed., *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). In his earlier work *Symposium*, Plato seems to reflect a more positive evaluation of some forms of homoerotic activity (*Sym.* 189–98). However, this work is fraught with interpretive difficulties, especially when trying to sort out which state-

is more or less correct, though a bit too sweeping, when he concludes: "any sexual activity of women that was not directed toward procreation was 'unnatural' in the ancient world" (p. 244).

There are two problems with Brownson's argument, however. First, nowhere is procreation ever mentioned or even hinted at in Rom 1. Brownson must assume that Paul's underlying moral logic of "against nature" assumes that only sexual relations with procreative potential are natural, but this runs into another problem: nowhere does Paul elevate procreation as essential to marriage or even sex. Contrary to his Greco-Roman and Jewish contemporaries, in all of his talk about marriage (1 Cor 7:1–40; Eph 5:22–33; Col 3:18–4:1), Paul never lists procreation as the purpose, or even a purpose, of marital sex. If Paul's underlying moral logic of Rom 1 is that sex must comprise procreative potential, we would expect to see such concerns elsewhere in Paul. But we do not.

A second problem is that Brownson himself recognizes Paul's lack of concern for procreation within marriage. Earlier, Brownson contended that, according to Paul in 1 Cor 7, "Marriage . . . has as its purpose *not the bearing of children* but the exercise of mutual care and the avoidance of uncontrolled lust (1 Cor. 7:2–9)" (p. 117). Again, he writes: "Marriage is still important, but the *purpose of procreation plays no role in Paul's discussion of marriage*" (p. 117). The same goes for the Pastoral Epistles and discussions about the household codes in Ephesians and Colossians (e.g., Eph 5:21–33; Col 3:18–4:1; Titus 2:1–10). "In all the instructions about the husband-wife relationship in these codes, we never see any discussion of procreation at all" (p. 118). Brownson concludes: "The moral logic of the Bible is thus fairly clear on the subject; procreation is an important purpose of marriage, and marriage is the sole context where procreation should happen, but marriage has something more than procreation as its essential reason for being" (p. 118).

How is it, then, that Brownson later assumes that Paul condemns same-gender intercourse in Rom 1:26–27 because such acts are "a violation of the 'biological imperative' to bear children" (p. 246)—an imperative that Brownson himself shows is absent in Paul? It appears that Brownson has disproven his own argument. There is no reason to assume that Paul condemned gay and lesbian sex simply because it could not procreate.

FEMINIZATION OF THE PASSIVE PARTNER

Along with lacking procreative potential, Brownson argues that Paul's underlying moral logic of homoeroticism is that such relations "treated a man as a woman, inherently degrading the passive partner, and more generally because they violated understood gender roles in the conventions of the ancient world" (p. 267). "Male-male sex in particular was 'unnatural' because it degraded the passive partner into acting like a woman." It of course was

ments reflect Plato's actual beliefs. In any case, in his last work *Laws*, Plato clearly condemns homosexual sex as "unnatural."

"inherently shameful and degrading for a man to be reduced to the status of a female by playing the passive role in sexual intercourse" (p. 245).

Brownson's argument once again contains much historical merit. The belief that the passive partner in homosexual sex is feminized is well documented in the Greco-Roman culture.⁷ Suetonius sums up the view nicely, perhaps crudely, when he refers to Julius Caesar as "every woman's man and every man's woman," referring to the Caesar's role as the passive partner with the Bithynian king Nicomedes (Suetonius, *Jul.* 52.3). Cicero mocks Mark Antony for being a "common whore" and later a "wife" to Curio on the same grounds (*Phil.* 2.44–45). The Jewish Hellenist Pseudo Phocylides critiques lesbian sex for the same reason: "let women not imitate the sexual role of men" (*Ps. Phoc.* 192). The impetus behind these critiques reveal the same assumption: Men should act like the superior men that they are, while women should remain in their inferior role as the receptive partner. When a man acts like a woman in intercourse, he loses his "man card."

Brownson's argument about Paul's moral logic, therefore, has deep roots in Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. And again, the implications are obvious: if we believe that Paul shares such patriarchal assumptions about gender hierarchy, that the woman is "in all things inferior to the man" (Josephus, *Ap.* 2.24), then we may be wise to move beyond Paul's moral logic. But if we do not believe that women are inferior to men, then we should not embrace the same assumptions about men being reduced to the low status of women by being penetrated. In fact, Bernadette Brooten argued for the same point in her landmark work on lesbianism in the ancient world 20 years ago. After showing that Paul does indeed critique all forms of homoerotic behavior in Rom 1, she points out "that Paul's condemnation of homoeroticism, particularly female homoeroticism, reflects and helps to maintain a *gender asymmetry based on female subordination.*" Brooten, like Brownson, is troubled by Paul's moral logic and therefore concludes: "I hope that churches today . . . will no longer teach Rom 1:26 as authoritative."⁸

But does Paul share the same cultural perspective on the value of women? Would he condemn gay sex because it stripped the passive partner of his male honor, lowering him to the status of a mere woman?

Once again, Brownson's argument about the feminization of the passive partner receives no explicit mention in Rom 1. Clearly, Paul believes that homoeroticism is "against nature," but this phrase is used throughout the ancient world to critique homosexual behavior for a wide array of different reasons. Feminizing the passive partner is only one of those reasons (e.g., Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 122.7; Musonius Rufus 12), but it is not the only reason. It is not altogether clear that the phrase "against nature" *must* connote the feminization of the passive partner (and a low view of women)

7. For a survey of texts, see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

8. Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 302.

unless an author qualifies the phrase as such. Plato, for instance, referred to homosexual sex as “against nature” because of procreation (*Laws* 636B–D) and the fact that animals only (according to Plato) engage in heterosexual sex (*Laws* 636B–D; 836): “the law will prescribe that men use sexual intercourse for procreation, as in nature; that they refrain from the male, if they are to avoid intentionally killing the human race and sowing their seed, as it were, on rocks and stones” (*Laws* 838). Plato certainly believes that the passive partner loses his male honor if he is penetrated; however, such concerns are not at the forefront of his view that homosexual sex is “against nature.” For Seneca, however, homosexual sex is “against nature” precisely because the passive partner is feminized:

Don't those men who exchange their clothing with women's seem to you to live *contrary to Nature*? Don't those men who see to it that a boyish appearance shines at a different time of life also live *contrary to Nature*? What crueler or more wretched thing could happen? *Will he never be allowed to become a man, just so he can continue to take the passive role with another man?* (*Moral Epistles* 122.7)

Seneca, unlike Plato, does not refer to procreation or the animal kingdom to proscribe homosexual sex. For Seneca, “contrary to nature” means the feminization of the passive partner, but this is only clear because he specifically qualifies “against nature” as such.

But Paul does not. It cannot be assumed Paul prohibits homoeroticism as “against nature” precisely because it feminizes the passive partner since he does not, like Seneca, mention this explicitly. Paul grounds his moral logic in the creation account in Gen 1–2 but does specify which aspect of gender is being violated in homoerotic activity.⁹

We could still salvage Brownson's argument if we could show that Paul elsewhere maintains this gender hierarchy, that women are inferior and passive to men and that men should therefore remain active in sexual encounters. A quick survey of Paul's view of women—without opening up another debate—finds little to support Brownson's view of Rom 1. Contrary to the Jewish and Greco-Roman hierarchical view of gender, Paul exhibits a radically high view of women. Paul breaks cultural codes by calling several women “co-workers” (Rom 16:3–4; Phil 4:3), “workers in the Lord” (Rom 16:6, 12) deacons (Rom 16:1–2; 1 Tim 3:11), prophets (1 Cor 11:5; cf. Acts 21:9), and he quite possibly calls Phoebe a “patron” (Rom 16:2) and Junia an “apostle” (Rom 16:7). In Christ there is neither “male nor female” (Gal 3:28) and women have just as much authority over their husbands'

9. Paul's entire argument in Rom 1 has deep roots in the creation account. God, who is called “the Creator” (1:25), has been revealing himself “ever since the creation of the world” (1:20). Moreover, the use of *θήλειαι* and *ἄρσενες* in Rom 1:26–27 almost certainly alludes back to LXX Gen 1:27, and Rom 1:23 clearly echoes Gen 1:26. Less clear, though probable, connections between Rom 1 and Gen 1–3 are references to “the lie” (Rom 1:25), shame (Rom 1:27; cf. Gen 3:1, 8), and knowledge (Rom 1:19, 21, 28, 32; cf. Gen 2:17; 3:5), and sentence of death (Rom 1:32; cf. Gen 2:17; 3:4–5, 20, 23).

bodies as their husbands have over theirs (1 Cor 7:3–5)—a revolutionary statement in its own right. Even if Paul advocates for different roles within the household (e.g. Eph 5:22–33), he commands men to self-sacrificially serve their wives and never, contra Josephus, suggests that females should submit to their husbands because they are inferior to men. Instead, Paul grounds these different but equal roles in the trinity.

Now, this is not the place to argue for or against women in ministry. Both complementarian and egalitarian readings of Paul (most of them, at least) would acknowledge Paul's strikingly high view of women in light of his cultural context. Yet Brownson (and Brooten) assumes that Paul agrees with his Greco-Roman contemporaries that women are inferior and that this belief drives his moral logic for prohibiting homoerotic activity. Unless Paul comes out and says explicitly that homoerotic behavior reduces the status of men in Rom 1—which many Greco-Roman writers did, but Paul does not—then there is little exegetical merit in assuming that homosexual activity “degraded the passive partner into acting like a woman” and thereby clothed him in “shame” (p. 245). It does seem that Paul believed that homoerotic activity confused God-given gender roles. But there is no good reason for Brownson to assume that Paul upheld a socially constructed hierarchy in these roles that assumed a low view of women. Paul believed that women—like Priscilla and Junia—were equal to men.

HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: DID IT EXIST?

Brownson's reconstruction of Paul's moral logic in Rom does not hold up to close scrutiny. But my main critique of Brownson's work has to do with a particular thread that crops up throughout his argument. It is an assumption that many revisionists make; indeed, they almost need to make it to limit Rom 1 to some illicit form of homoerotic activity. The assumption is this: Paul had no examples of committed, consensual, same-sex couples that we have today. Therefore, he could not have condemned such monogamous, homosexual relations in Rom 1. Brownson writes:

Such a perspective [consensual homosexual unions] is found nowhere in the literature of Paul's day. Instead, in that literature, whenever same-sex eroticism is viewed negatively, particularly in sources contemporaneous with Paul, it is regarded as a particular manifestation of self-centered lust, one that is not content with women alone but is driven to ever more exotic and unnatural forms of stimulation in the pursuit of pleasure. It represents the pinnacle of wanton self-indulgence at the expense of others. It is entirely reasonable to assume that this is the kind of image that Paul's language in Romans 1 would have stirred up in the minds of his original readers (p. 156; cf. pp. 166, 168).

Again, Brownson argues that “writers in the first century, including Paul, did not look at same-sex eroticism with the understanding of sexual orientation that is commonplace today” (p. 166), and that “the notion of sexual

orientation was absent" (p. 170), and that the "broad and generic concepts like 'homosexuality' did not exist in the ancient world" (p. 218). Brownson's assumption provides the necessary foil to view Paul's words about homosexual sex in Rom 1 (cf. 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) as irrelevant for our question of whether gay and lesbian unions should be sanctioned by the church. Paul did not, and could not, have consensual, monogamous, homosexual relations in mind.

There is some truth to what Brownson says—but only some. It is true that the modern concept of homosexuality, drawn from the field of social science in the 19th century and forged in the caldron of post-Freudian psychology, was not around in the first century. It is also true that through modern studies in psychology, biology, and anthropology, we now know much more about the complex nature of sexuality, orientation, and gender. Brownson and others rightly caution moderns from anachronistically reading our understanding of homosexuality back into the ancient material. However, he pushes this caution too far. While it is true that the modern concept of homosexuality did not exist in the ancient world, and while it is also true that we know much more about sexual orientation today, the question is whether there are any ancient parallels, expressed in their own words and within their own categories, to what we *now* call homosexuality and sexual orientation.

Indeed, there are. Paul's world contained a vast array of perspectives on sexual orientation, examples of consensual and nonexploitative same sex couples, and even homosexual marriages. There is no historical reason why we should assume that Paul could not have had examples of consensual same-sex relations before his eyes when he penned Rom 1.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Brownson argues—or assumes—that a 21st century understanding of sexual orientation was unknown to the ancients. Again, this is true for the most part. However, there were many examples of ancient writers speculating about why some men and women desired sex with the same gender.

Aristotle for instance said that some homoerotic desires come from habit, but others spring from nature (*Eth.* 1148b). In other words, some people are born with same-sex desires.¹⁰ Some ancients even speculated about certain biological defects that cause some men to desire other men. One writer explains that males who desire to be penetrated are born with a physiological defect where semen is abnormally secreted into the anus and sparks a desire for friction (Pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata* 4.26; cf. 879a36–880a5; 879b28–30). Soranus, the Greek physician from Ephesus, also believed that same-sex *eros* is shaped more by nature rather than nurture, but locates the source of the desire in the mind or spirit (*De morbis chronicis* 4:131, 132, 134). This seems to be shared by Philo, who talks about "the

10 Discussed in Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 81

disease of effeminacy in their souls" (*VCon.* 60; *Ab.* 136). Another writer believes that (a) both male and female contribute sperm in conception, and (b) both male and female sperm contain a male and female element, and (c) one male/female element will "predominate" in the union of the two (Hippocratic *De victu* 1.28–29). In other words, sexuality exists on a continuum between male and female. Men may be born less male, and women less female. In both cases, one's biology contributes to their desire for sex with a particular gender.

We can certainly write off these speculations as unscientific, barbaric, and downright wrong. And we should. But the veracity of these claims about orientation is irrelevant. What matters is that ancient writers *were making* such claims about orientation—unscientific they may be. It is clear that at least some of Paul's contemporaries formed their own opinions about sexual orientation; namely, that same-sex desires were biological.

Some writers were not as specific—or creative—as the medical texts cited above about such orientation, yet they still seemed to believe in a form of what we would call homosexual orientation. Pliny refers to "men who hate intercourse with women" (*N.H.* 28.99).¹¹ Phaedrus, who wrote his *Fable* around the time of Paul, presents a mythological account about why some people desire sex with the same gender.¹² He says that the god Prometheus got drunk and attached male genitalia to women and women genitalia to men. In other words, some women are trapped in men's bodies and some men are trapped in women's bodies (*Phdr.* 4.16). The account, of course, is mythical and humorous, but nonetheless reflects ancient assumptions that desire for same sex intercourse is inherent. Less mythical is Lucian's report of a woman named Megilla who says: "I was born as a woman like the rest of you, but my mind, desire, and everything else in me are that of a man" (*Dialogue of the Courtesans* 5:4). Today, we would say that Megilla was a lesbian or transgender, even if such categories were not available to the ancients.

Bernadette Brooten has gathered evidence from ancient astrological texts, which suggested that sexual orientation was determined by the arrangement of the stars. One text says: "If the Sun and Moon are in masculine signs and Venus is also in a masculine sign in a woman's chart, women will be born who take on a man's character and desire intercourse with women like men" (*Matheseos libri viii* 7.25.1).¹³ Dorotheos wrote her astrological poem, *Carmen Astrologicum*, right around the time Paul was sending his letter to the Roman church. In it, she says that if the sun and moon are at a particular location when women are born, they "will be a Lesbian, desirous of women, and if the native is a male, he will be desirous of males" (2.7.6).¹⁴ After looking at many more examples, Brooten concludes: "Con-

11. See the discussion in Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 188.

12. "What cause created Tribads (lesbians) and soft men?"

13. This work ("Eight Books of the *Mathesis*") by Eirnicus Maternus dates to A.D. 334; see Brooten, *Love between Women*, 132–137.

14. See *ibid.*, 119–20. The text has been preserved in Arabic. The word *lesbian* translates the Arabic *sahaqa*.

trary to the view that the idea of sexual orientation did not develop until the nineteenth century, the astrological sources demonstrate the existence in the Roman world of the concept of a lifelong erotic orientation."¹⁵

Now, Craig Williams, like Brownson, argues extensively in his book *Roman Homosexuality* that our modern concept of homosexuality was unknown to the ancients. However, even Williams believes that:

If they were alive today, men like this would no doubt be called, and would likely call themselves, *straight* or *gay*. But if we consider them in their native cultural context, making reference to the conceptual categories in which their peers would have placed them, we cannot speak of them as *heterosexuals*, *homosexuals*, or *bisexuals*, defined in terms of the sex of their preferred sexual partners within the context of a universally applicable system of categorizing human beings on that basis.¹⁶

According to Williams, therefore, while our categories of sexuality did not exist in the first century, parallel categories did. Some men and women desired sex with the same gender—sometimes exclusively.

But what were the ancient categories and how do they correlate with our contemporary categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality? Williams has explored this question extensively. He shows that the Greco-Roman world viewed all people along a spectrum of masculinity and femininity, rather than heterosexuality and homosexuality. In fact, a man could be considered manly even if he preferred to have sex only with men, as long as he was the active partner. Also, a man could be considered feminine if he wore soft cloths and shaved his chest hair—even though he had sex with women. Working within *their own categories* of masculinity and femininity, therefore, our modern concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality do not exactly fit. However, as Williams and others recognize, there were many men who preferred to have sex with the same gender and were even believed to have been biologically oriented this way. Some may have been considered masculine by ancient standards; others may have been viewed as feminine. But such men, who preferred sex with men over women (sometimes exclusively) would have been considered (and considered themselves) at the very least bisexual or even gay today.

Therefore, Brownson's claim that "writers in the first century, including Paul, did not look at same-sex eroticism with the understanding of sexual orientation that is commonplace today" (p. 166) ignores a wealth of historical evidence to the contrary. Maybe Paul did not have any concept of sexual orientation, or maybe he did. In any case, we cannot appeal to

15. *Ibid.*, 140. Many other scholars agree with Brooten, including Amy Richlin, "Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (1993) 523–73; Rabun Taylor, "Two Pathic Subcultures in Ancient Rome," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1997) 319–71; Richard Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to J. Boswell's Exegesis of Rom. 1," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986) 184–215.

16. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 249.

the absence of such a view in his cultural environment and then project it on Paul as Brownson does. When Paul therefore says that “men. . .gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (Rom 1:27), he is not revealing ignorance about sexual orientation; Paul does not necessarily believe that all men are born straight and could not have been born with sexual desires for men. For Paul, the question of orientation is irrelevant. Homosexual unions violate the boundaries of gender established by God at creation.

CONSENSUAL SAME-SEX COUPLES

Throughout his book, Brownson repeats the common assumption that the only types of same-sex relations available to Paul were bad: pederasty (love of boys), prostitution, orgies, or other byproducts of oversexed men who become bored with heterosexual sex. But again, Brownson oversimplifies the historical material. Based on the literature, we can see many different types of homosexual relations that existed on a spectrum of nonconsensual to consensual—even monogamous.¹⁷

For instance, not every form of homoeroticism in Greece can be written off as pederasty, even though this was the dominant form among males. Agathon was by all modern standards gay, and he had a life-long lover of equal age and status named Pausanias (Plato, *Sym.* 193B; cf. Aelian, *Var. hist.* 2.21).¹⁸ Parmenides (age 65) was in a homosexual relationship with Zenon (age 40).¹⁹ And the relationship between the epic Greek heroes Achilles and Patroklos was considered by many ancient authors as homoerotic and consensual (Plato, *Sym.* 179E–180B; Aeschylus, *Myrmidons* frags. 135–37).²⁰

Consensual homosexual relationships can be seen during the Roman period as well. We could cite the well-known example of Nero, who on two occasions publicly married other men, where he dressed up as a bride and preferred the passive role in intercourse. The mutual love and health of these relationships, of course, could be questioned. A better example of nonexploitative same-sex love can be seen in Hadrian’s love affair with Antinous. Although married to his wife Sabina, Hadrian’s relationship with Antinous was celebrated as much more than just an erotic homosexual affair. When Antinous suddenly died in A.D. 130, Hadrian was said to have wept like a woman at the loss of his lover. Hadrian’s excessive and unbecoming emotional response shows that Antinous was not a mere sex toy.²¹

17. For a recent survey and analysis of texts, see Thomas K. Hubbard, “Peer Homosexuality,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* (ed. Thomas K. Hubbard; Oxford: Blackwell, 2014) 128–49.

18. See *ibid.*, 142–43.

19. See the discussion in Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 6; cf. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) *passim*.

20. Hubbard, “Peer Homosexuality,” 142.

21. John Boswell concludes that Hadrian “appears to have been exclusively gay” (*Homosexuality*, 84).

Suetonius describes the emperor Galba in terms that would be considered homosexual today: "As for his sexual desires, he was more inclined to males, and among males only to the very strong and experienced." When Galba heard that Nero had died and that he would now be the new emperor, he grabbed his long-time lover, Icelus, and "not only received him publicly with intense kisses, but begged him to have himself depilated immediately and then took him aside" (Suetonius, *Galba* 22). The third-century emperor Elagabalus used to dress up like a female barmaid and play the role of the women in intercourse with men at the brothels. Not an example of a healthy relationship, of course. But later on, Elagabalus fell in love with his male charioteer, Hierocles and their relationship was much more than sexual. Dio Cassius says that Elagabalus "so loved Hierocles, not with a light disposition, but with a vehement and deeply rooted love" (*Dio Cassius* 80.15). Elagabalus was not monogamous, but he would certainly be considered gay today.²²

Consensual, same-sex love—even marriages—can be found among women around the time of Paul. Iamblichos (2nd century A.D.) talks about the marriage between two women named Berenike and Mesopotamia (Photios, *bibliotheke* 94.77a–b).²³ Lucian of Samosata mentions the marriage of Megilla and Demonassa (*Dialogues of the Courtesans*, 5.1–3),²⁴ Clement of Alexandria refers to women-women marriage (*Paidagogos* 3.3.21.3), and Ptolemy of Alexandria (*Tetrabiblos* 3.14 sect. 172) refers to women taking other women as "lawful wives."²⁵

Other marriages between women are more or less implied. *Sifra Ahare* 9:8 forbids marriage between two men and marriage between two women, which would be superfluous if such marriages were unknown.²⁶ Likewise, *Sifra* on Lev 18:3 prohibits not just female eroticism, but women marrying women (the assumption is that the Canaanites and Egyptians did this), which "does not prohibit female homoeroticism per se, but rather marriage between women."²⁷

Other examples could be cited, but suffice it to say: There was a broad spectrum of same-sex relations available to Paul. We cannot assume that Paul only had nonconsensual and unhealthy homosexual relations in view and therefore condemned (only) *these* types of relations. Paul most probably was aware of at least some consensual, even marital, unions among both men and women to the same gender.

22. Although Elagabalus married many women, Dio Cassius says that he had sex with women only to learn how to act like a woman in bed (80.13).

23. See Brooten, *Love between Women*, 51.

24. This lesbian couple, however, ends up seducing a woman named Leaena into a sexual relationship.

25. *Ibid.*, 332.

26. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 101.

27. Brooten, *Love between Women*, 65, citing Michael Satlow in agreement ("They Abused Him Like a Woman': Homoeroticism, Gender Blurring, and the Rabbis in Late Antiquity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 [1994] 16–17).

CONCLUSION

James Brownson has opened up new questions and reframed old categories. He has successfully tossed the ball in the court of traditionalists, who still believe that the Bible prohibits all forms of homosexual unions. Perhaps the most fruitful aspect of Brownson's book is that he consistently and accurately treated the topic of homosexuality with sensitivity, compassion, and pastoral care. After all, homosexuality denotes not an issue to be dissected, but the orientation and practice of people to be loved with the truth of the gospel. Brownson has, I believe, advanced the conversation about Christians and homosexuality.

But he has not ended it. Brownson's book, which has been hailed as a game-changer, the rock solid go-to book for the revisionist reading, rests on shaky historical and exegetical grounds. I would hope that Christians on both sides of the debate will not accept Brownson's conclusions at face value but will explore the issue for themselves. Once they do this, they will find that there are some questions left unanswered, many questions not raised—and many questions answered wrongly.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.