

## Romans 1:26-27

### I have heard liberal Bible scholars teach that Romans 1:26-27 allows for homosexuality. Is this at all true?

Paul's epistle to the Romans is often considered to be his theological *magnum opus*, and for good reasons. It is a well drawn out presentation on the gospel as he proclaims it among the nations, as Paul is preparing to move to the Western Mediterranean, and wants the Roman Believers to know what the mission is that the Lord has entrusted to him. Most expositors agree that Romans was written against a backdrop of either Corinth or Achaia, and such places were harbingers of gross sexual sin, likely affecting Paul's choice of words. It should thus be no surprise that Paul considers idolatry *and* inappropriate sexual behavior as direct consequences of the fall of humanity. As he describes,

**"For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error"** (Romans 1:25-27, NASU).

The traditional interpretation of this text throughout centuries of Christian theology **has undoubtedly and undeniably viewed it as relating to homosexuality**. Only in recent days as homosexuality has become legal in the West and acceptable as an "alternative lifestyle" have some liberal Christian theologians viewed Romans 1:26-27 as relating to behavior *other than* homosexual intercourse. Skewed definitions of Biblical concepts are appearing in some theological resources, as *EDB* summarizes, "The Bible does not appear to say anything directly about homosexuality in this modern sense of the term, but a few passages do refer to same gender genital acts."<sup>1</sup> It goes on to say, in regard to verses such as Genesis 18:16-33 and Leviticus 18:22; 20:1, "None of [these passages] appears to address modern questions directly."<sup>2</sup>

The debate in favor of homosexuality from liberal theologians often focuses on the so-called "relational" side, arguing that since the Bible does not directly address the modern questions of commitment between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, it could thus be acceptable as "love" is the principal thrust of the gospel. Even evangelicals who would strongly oppose today's Messianic movement and its emphasis on a Torah foundation, still will agree that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul is speaking about homosexuality and considers it a gross sin. Ben Witherington III candidly states, "Vv. 26-27 are about as clear a condemnation of homosexual and lesbian behavior as exists in the NT,"<sup>3</sup> even though he provides no Tanach references in favor or support of Paul's position.

Evangelical Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser—who holds to a much higher view of the Torah in his theology—represents a standard conservative view, summarizing,

"To prohibit homosexuality today, some would argue, would be like forbidding unclean meats. It is admitted, of course, that there is a category of temporary ceremonial laws, but I do not agree that homosexuality is among them. Nothing in its proscription points to or anticipates Christ, and the death penalty demanded for its violation places it in the moral realm and not in temporary ceremonial legislation."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L. Wm. Countryman, "Homosexuality," in *EDB*, 602.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 603.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 69.

<sup>4</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 118.

Those in the Jewish Synagogue today who believe that homosexuality is a valid behavior are consequently often very liberal, believing only that a cultural Judaism is what God asks of His people. And that cultural Judaism is very much pick-and-choose, “changing” with the times!

It is, of course, very important to understand the worldview of the Apostle Paul when writing vs. 26-27. This is not an issue that is going away, and we need to be prepared to directly encounter it should homosexual issues arise in our Messianic communities, or more likely we find people asking honest questions about it in the context of sexual ethics from Scripture.

Paul remarks that as a direct result of the Fall, human beings have rejected the primacy of God in their lives: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (NIV). He then goes on to say, “their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (vs. 26b-27a, ESV).

Because of discussions circulating today not only in society, but also in theology, it is absolutely critical that Believers understand the distinct worldview of Paul—so as to accurately understand what he is telling the Romans. It is not uncommon for some to conclude that only homosexual activity involved with idolatry, rather than homosexual intercourse independent of such religious practice, is only what is being talked about.

We should begin by asking ourselves how the good Rabbi from Tarsus, a Pharisee trained by Gamaliel, would have thought about homosexuality from the Torah and Tanach.

Paul very clearly says that due to the curse on the world, men and women have both exchanged natural functions for unnatural functions. When God created man and woman, He made them in His own image (Genesis 1:27), and decreed “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28, NASU). In Genesis 2:18-24, in the second account of Creation, we see how God made woman to be the man’s partner in his endeavors:

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’ Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought *them* to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (NASU).

Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle Paul directly appeal to Genesis 2:24 regarding the Divine estate of marriage (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:7, 8; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31). God originally made the woman to be the life partner and significant ally of the man—not another man for the man—so that the two might reproduce and tend the wonderful Creation that He made for both of them. Acceptance of anything other than relations between a man and a woman mars not only God’s original intention for them as “one flesh,” but also the fact that human beings have been created in His image and for His Divine purposes. Furthermore, as Douglas J. Moo points out, “it is clear that Paul depicts homosexual activity as a violation of God’s creation order, another indication of the departure from true knowledge and worship of God.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, it can be easily seen that homosexual acts are not only sinful, but they are **idolatrous in and of themselves** as men and women “worship themselves” in a reality that is seen outside of the realm decreed by the Lord.

The fact that prohibitions against homosexual activities are seen in the Torah should be self-obvious to this discussion:

“You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22, NASU).

“If *there is* a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them” (Leviticus 20:13, NASU).

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 115.

The commands *v'et-zakar lo tishkav mishkevei ishah* (וְאִתְּזָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה) in Leviticus 18:22a, and *v'ish asher yishkav et-zakar mishkevei ishah* (וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת־זָכָר מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה) in Leviticus 20:13a, both concern a man “lying” with another man—as he would with a woman. Clearly, some kind of sexual intercourse is what is in mind. The verb *shakav* (שָׁכַב) or “to lie down” can very much have connotations “to lie down and have sexual intercourse” (*HALOT*).<sup>6</sup> The Lord is very clear in that He considers this behavior to be *toevah* (תוֹעֵבָה) or an “abomination.” The severity of this act once merited capital punishment.

The first major instance we see regarding homosexuality in the Torah concerns the men of Sodom wanting to burst into the home of Lot, and gang rape his angelic visitors:

“Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them.’ But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, ‘Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly!’” (Genesis 19:4-7, NASU).

Here, the outcry of the men of Sodom is “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them” (NIV). The verb *yada* (יָדָע) or “to know” is used to describe this demand, and in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice) it can certainly mean “to know sexually, have intercourse with, **copulate**” (*HALOT*).<sup>7</sup> A similar instance is seen in Judges 19:22, clearly attesting that the Ancient Israelites encountered homosexual activities among the Canaanites:

“While they were celebrating, behold, the men of the city, certain worthless fellows, surrounded the house, pounding the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man, saying, ‘Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations [*yada*; ‘have sex,’ NIV] with him’” (NASU).

The Apostle Paul’s training in the morality of the Hebrew Tanach would certainly never allow him to accept homosexual intercourse or relationships as a valid practice for the faith community. Not only did it go against God’s intention at Creation for the man and woman to reproduce, but the examples seen in the Tanach of homosexual behavior often associate it with violence. From a First Century Jewish perspective, acceptance of any kind of homosexuality **was never an option**. Homosexuality was a perversion to be associated with the pagan Gentiles, and to say otherwise is to create an artificial world of the First Century Synagogue that never existed. James D.G. Dunn indicates,

“In the Greco-Roman world homosexuality was quite common and even highly regarded...It was a feature of social life, indulged in not least by the gods...and emperors...But Jewish reaction to it as a perversion, a pagan abomination, is consistent throughout the OT.”<sup>8</sup>

What is interesting about Paul, is that even though his declarations against homosexuality are firmly rooted within the Torah and Tanach—is that in writing to the Romans he makes use of some important classical terms that also describe the practice. He uses *tēn phusikēn* (τὴν φυσικὴν) to describe the “natural function” (NASU) or “natural relations” (RSV) between men and women. C.E.B. Cranfield concurs that by using this, “Paul clearly means ‘in accordance with the intention of the Creator’...For this appeal to ‘nature’ in the sense of the order manifest in the created world compare 1 Cor 11:14, where ἡ φύσις αὐτῆ [hē phusis autē] might almost be translated ‘the very way God has made us’.”<sup>9</sup> Dunn states that *phusis* (φύσις) “is not a Hebrew concept...The concept is primarily Greek, and typically Stoic—to live in harmony with the natural order and its divine rationality.”<sup>10</sup> In writing to a predominantly non-Jewish audience in Rome, Paul feels at liberty to use terminology that they are familiar with to communicate the moral truths of God’s Torah.

Today among some liberal commentators *para phusin* (παρὰ φύσιν) or what is “against nature” is sometimes argued to not necessarily concern condemnation upon homosexuality. Instead, some suggest that Paul is speaking against heterosexuals engaged in unwarranted homosexuality, which would be contrary to one’s predetermined disposition. This view is intended to provide theological support for the concept that some are homosexual, and others are heterosexual, from the time of birth. With this in mind, rather than male or female homosexuality

<sup>6</sup> *HALOT*, 2:1487.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:391.

<sup>8</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 38a. (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 65.

<sup>9</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 1-8* (London: T&T Clark, 1975), pp 123-124.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:64.

stemming as a result of man and woman's fall and rejection of God, all that Paul is condemning is homosexual behavior on the part of heterosexuals, likely in the context of Roman temple prostitution or religious rites.

Furthermore, lexical support for the homosexual agenda may be provided as the preposition *para*, when joined with an accusative noun (indicating direct object) can mean "more than" or "rather than" (CGEDNT).<sup>11</sup> To soften the blow it is said, Paul is really just speaking about things "more than nature" or "rather than nature." So from this angle, Paul certainly cannot be condemning two men or two women in a committed relationship—that just or simply "goes beyond" Creation's purpose of a union resulting in childbearing. Yet this line of reasoning makes a severe and fatal flaw: it assumes that the term *para phusin* is used only by Paul, and has no parallels in ancient literature.

The Jewish historian Josephus employs *para phusin* to describe homosexual activities:

"[W]hat reason can there be why we should desire to imitate the laws of other nations, while we see they are not observed by their own legislators? And why do not the Lacedemonians [Spartans] think of abolishing that form of their government which suffers them not to associate with any others, as well as their contempt of matrimony? And why do not the Eleans and Thebans abolish that **unnatural** [*para phusin*] and impudent lust, **which makes them lie with males?**" (*Against Apion* 2.273).<sup>12</sup>

"[T]he Greeks...ascribed...sodomitical practices to the gods themselves, as a part of their good character; and, indeed, it was according to the same manner that the gods married their own sisters. This the Greeks contrived as an apology for their own absurd and **unnatural** [*para phusin*] pleasures" (*Against Apion* 2.275).<sup>13</sup>

In these two quotations from Josephus, he criticizes the homosexuality of the Spartans, and later how the Greek religion allowed for homosexual activities among their gods (as well as incest). *Para phusin* is used to describe these sinful acts.

The Jewish philosopher Philo also had a great disdain for homosexual activities, in describing the men of Sodom (*On Abraham* 133-141). His scathing words against them testify,

"As men, being unable to bear discreetly a satiety of these things, get restive like cattle, and become stiff-necked, and discard the laws of nature, pursuing a great and intemperate indulgence of gluttony, and drinking, and unlawful connections; for not only did they go mad after women, and defile the marriage bed of others, **but also those who were men lusted after one another**, doing unseemly things, and not regarding or respecting their common nature" (*On Abraham* 135).<sup>14</sup>

Here, Philo expands the sins of the men of Sodom as first involving the rape of women, but later devolving into homosexual activities. He says that they had no regard for *ton tēs phuseōs nomon* (τὸν τῆς φύσεως νόμον) or "the laws of nature," clearly being guided by a Torah ethic.

These examples from Josephus and Philo, of course, appear in the milieu of Hellenistic Jewish literature. They attest that *para phusin* or "against nature" clearly does relate to homosexual activities that were considered abominable in the sight of God. Many of the Jews in Rome would have known how the Diaspora Synagogue could have adopted "*para phusin*" to refer to such an abominable Gentile sexual act. Yet, what really nails the coffin for those arguing that *para phusin* does not refer to homosexuality—is that ***para phusin* was used in a classical context to refer to homosexuality**, independent of its Jewish usage. Richard B. Hays remarks,

"There are abundant instances, both in the Greco-Roman moral philosophers and in literary texts, of the opposition between 'natural' (*kata physin*) and 'unnatural' (*para physin*) behavior...In particular, the opposition between 'natural' and 'unnatural' is very frequently used...as a way of distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual behavior."<sup>15</sup>

Hays gives a variety of examples from classical literature, where *para phusin* is clearly used to refer to homosexuality:

"Plutarch has Daphnaeus, one of the speakers in his *Dialogue on Love*, disparage 'union contrary to nature with males' (*hē para physin homilia pros arrēnas*), as contrasted to 'the love between men and women,' which is characterized as 'natural' (*tē physei*). A few sentences later, Daphnaeus complains that those who 'consort with

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<sup>11</sup> CGEDNT, 131.

<sup>12</sup> *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 811.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 397.

<sup>15</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no. 1 [1986]: 192.

males' willingly are guilty of 'weakness and effeminacy,' because 'contrary to nature (*para phusin*),' they 'allow themselves in Plato's words "to be covered and mounted like cattle"' (*Dialogue on Love* 751C, E). Plutarch's reference to Plato demonstrates the point that Paul did not originate the application of the *kata phusin/para phusin* dichotomy to heterosexual and homosexual behavior. Its common appearance in the writings of the Hellenistic moral philosophers is testimony to a convention which can be traced back at least as far as Plato (*Laws* I.636C), almost variably in contexts where a negative judgment is pronounced on the morality or propriety of the 'unnatural' homosexual relations."<sup>16</sup>

In Plato's *Laws*, a defense of the Athenian style of life is seen when compared against that of the Spartans and Cretans. An Athenian is attested as saying,

"For instance, these gymnastic exercises and common meals, useful though they are to a state in many ways, are a danger of their encouragement in revolution...More especially, the very antiquity of these practices seems to have corrupted the natural pleasures of sex, which are common to man and beast. For these perversions, your two states may well be the first to be blamed, as well as others that make a particular point of gymnastic exercises. Circumstances may make you treat the subject either light-heartedly or seriously; in either case you ought to bear in mind that when male and female come together in order to have a child, the pleasure they experience seems to arise entirely naturally. But homosexual intercourse and lesbianism seem to be unnatural crimes of the first rank, and are committed because men and women cannot control their desire for pleasure" (*The Laws* 1.636c).<sup>17</sup>

Here, we have some direct attestations about how *para phusin* was used among classical philosophers to refer to homosexuality, and even how perverse these pagan philosophers considered the practice. These Hellenistic witnesses agree that male and female homosexuality were viewed as being forbidden and taboo.

The Apostle Paul's Jewish training and high regard for the Torah of Moses would never have permitted him to concede that homosexuality was anything less than an abomination. Furthermore, the attestation that *para phusin* or "against nature" is used in classical literature to refer to homosexuality—and that the Jewish Paul and Greek philosophers **actually agree on its perverseness**—strengthens the case against it, and surely does not weaken it. The propagation of homosexual activity is a rejection of God's will for man and woman to procreate, and one of the human principal acts of rebellion against His authority to be equated as idolatry against Him as an act of self-worship.

Those who would argue that *para phusin* can mean something other than "against nature"—and not be a direct reference to homosexuality—have committed extreme eisegetical error. They have read a modern social situation into an ancient text, and have ignored sound hermeneutical skills. Not only have advocates of the homosexual agenda severely misapplied Romans 1:26-27, but they have created an artificial construct by which to at best allow (as seen in the errant translations "more than nature" or "rather than nature"), and at worst actually condone, homosexual intercourse and relationships (the majority of which are not "monogamous").

The larger issue that is asked of us as Believers in Yeshua, particularly as it concerns gays and lesbians today, is that although their actions are clearly opposed by Scripture—how do we treat them as fellow human beings? In Romans 1:26-27 Paul neither asks nor answers the question how a Believer is to specifically regard a homosexual man or woman. Kaiser's thoughts are well taken:

"Homosexuality must be listed as a sexual perversion, a defilement of a country in which it is practiced, and an abomination in God's eyes. Anything less than this is a form of specious reasoning. It is a sin that must be dealt with as any other sin even though the gospel also offers freedom, forgiveness, and healing from this sin as from any other—or it is no gospel at all."<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Yeshua's declaration to those in His home synagogue at Nazareth speak volumes to this problem:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18, ESV; cf. Isaiah 61:1).

Witherington is one who thinks that in Romans 1:26-27, "Paul speaks of actions, not inclinations, attitudes or genetics."<sup>19</sup> Yet, the person who thinks about homosexual acts is just as guilty as the one "who looks at a woman with lust for her [and who] has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Many people

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>17</sup> Plato: *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 197.

<sup>19</sup> Witherington, *Romans*, 69.

engulfed in the sin of homosexuality, no different than those engulfed in heterosexual adultery, are looking for acceptance and love. Homosexuals are those who have been unable to find any kind of acceptance or love among the opposite gender, and so they look to their own gender to find it. Certainly while Paul considers the actions of homosexuality to be unacceptable; the thoughts of homosexuality are equally as unacceptable. Paul states that such people will receive “the appropriate penalty for their perversion” (HCSB).

The transforming power of the Messiah Yeshua to not only proclaim the good news of His Kingdom, but also the proclamation of liberty to captives and the oppressed, can release people from the power of homosexuality. Only when a homosexual person recognizes the sinfulness of his or her act, confesses of such sin, and then asks for God’s transforming power to change him or her—can *His overwhelming love* engulf that person in the acceptance that was sought via homosexuality. But this acceptance is unconditional, it is restorative, and it goes above and beyond what any kind of sexual act can bring. It is the love of our Heavenly Father toward a child that has returned to Him and His desiring to live by His original intention at Creation. We must be there as His representatives and ambassadors—the Body of Messiah (Him working through us)—to offer the freedom from bondage that only Yeshua provides.

The issue of homosexuality is not going away anytime soon, especially with the homosexual agenda and political bloc for gay rights that have emerged on the world scene. Today, many Christian denominations are dividing over this issue. Many evangelicals are greatly concerned that a firm Biblical ethic is being tossed out the window in favor of extreme compromise with sin. As many evangelicals leave their denominations, this is where only the emerging Messianic movement in the future can offer a valid **and more consistent** theological perspective given our high view of the Torah. In the future, we could actually see ourselves significantly swell in numbers. Yet in order to do this, we must become a more stable and mature spiritual movement, and engage more with the world as God’s Word does indeed have answers for those in bondage!

(Other Pauline passages that reference homosexuality, which are worthy of further consideration on your behalf, include: 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10.)