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## ENGAGING ROMANS: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ROMANS 1:26–27

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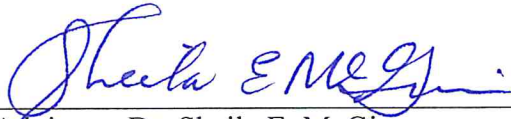
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ENGAGING ROMANS:  
AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ROMANS 1:26–27

An Essay Submitted to  
The Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
John Carroll University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Michael Younes  
2017

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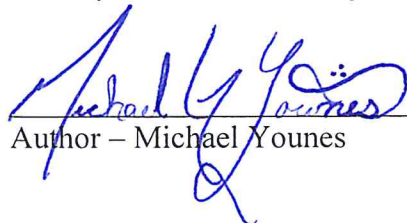


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28 July 2017

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28 July 2017

Date

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## INTRODUCTION

Romans 1:26–27 offers the first canonical reference to “homosexuality” in the New Testament. Many contemporary Christians use this text as the first of three notable texts in the Christian Testament to promote a heteronormative agenda over against the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>1</sup> However, such a reading of Rom 1:26–27 imposes a cultural context wholly different than the one in which Paul wrote.

A brief survey of the literature surrounding this text reveals “homosexuality” as a non-existent focus before the twentieth century. The interpreter’s pen bent towards this understanding with fever only in the later portion of the twentieth century, backlashing against the societal trend towards acceptance of individuals identifying with the LGBTQ+ community.

The term “homosexual” did not enter into modern discourse until the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The American Psychological Association (APA) first used the term officially with the development of the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM<sup>1</sup>) published in 1952; at that time, the APA

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<sup>1</sup> The other two texts include 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10.

<sup>2</sup> “Homosexuality,” *OED Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press); <http://0-www.oed.com.library.jcu.edu/view/Entry/88111> (accessed June 28, 2017).

diagnosed homosexuality as a mental disorder.<sup>3</sup> “In 1973, the APA removed the diagnosis of “homosexuality” from the second edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.”<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Church’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded in 1975 with the document *Persona Humana*, stating:

At the present time there are those who, basing themselves on observations in the psychological order, have begun to judge indulgently, and even to excuse completely, homosexual relations between certain people. This they do in opposition to the constant teaching of the Magisterium and to the moral sense of the Christian people.”<sup>5</sup>

This document opposed the scientific advances that removed “homosexuality” from the DSM<sup>2</sup> and set the stage for the Church’s response to homosexuality for the next 40 years.

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<sup>3</sup> “Sexual Deviation,” *Diagnostic and statistical manual: mental disorders*, 1st ed. (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1952), 38; published online at <http://www.turkpsikiyatri.org/arsiv/dsm-1952.pdf> (accessed June 28, 2017). This diagnosis is reserved for deviant sexuality that is not symptomatic of more extensive syndromes such as schizophrenic and obsessional reactions. The term includes most of the cases formerly classed as “psychopathic personality with pathologic sexuality.” The diagnosis includes sub-categories that specify the type of the pathologic behavior, e.g., homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism, and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, and mutilation).

<sup>4</sup> Jack Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality,” *Behavioral Sciences* (Basel) 5, no. 4 (2015): 565–75.

<sup>5</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Person Humana* §8 (December 1975); [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19751229\\_persona-humana\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html) (accessed June 28, 2017).

The present notion of “homosexuality” as an innate same-sex orientation is a contemporary development and therefore was not a concept known to Paul or his contemporaries. A reading of Paul’s message in Rom 1:26–27 first must be situated with an appreciation of the modern notions of homosexuality as well as an understanding of the historical context and purpose of the letter, which then can be brought into conversation with today’s context. My intention here is to re-examine this passage within its historical, social, and ideological context, to elucidate what Paul was trying to communicate to his first-century audience so it can be reinterpreted for a twenty-first-century audience. One cannot simply transpose Paul’s alleged condemnation of same-sex sexual acts onto the modern understanding of sexual orientation. No one in Paul’s time had a concept of “sexual orientation” as it was developed nearly 2000 years after his lifetime.

#### ASSUMPTIONS

I identify as a gay cis-male<sup>6</sup> and practicing Roman Catholic, so will be arguing from and with the Catholic perspective. I mention this in order to situate myself for the reader of this interpretation and, as Sandra Schneiders states, “to

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<sup>6</sup> Cis designates “a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth.” (“Cisgender, adj. and n.” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press); <http://0-www.oed.com.library.jcu.edu/view/Entry/35015487> (accessed June 28, 2017).

dispel that illusion of anonymous, objectively authoritative, and disinterested scholarship that written texts in general, and academic ones in particular, seem to generate.”<sup>7</sup> I further echo Schneiders’ view that, “by revealing my own historical development and social location with its particular limitations, interests and inevitable blind spots, I intend to invite my reader into a critical dialogue....”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, though all aspects of social location have effects on my scholarship, I wish to focus on being a gay reader of this passage. Some interpreters of this passage use it to condemn the LGBTQ+ community with whom I identify. I have a vested interest in how this text is interpreted, as I and those close to me have felt scorn of such condemnation. I seek in this interpretation to advance a different reading, to bring the Church into communion with the LGBTQ+ community and promote the notion the Kingdom of God welcomes all people.

Key terms that will be used throughout this paper include sexual orientation, gay/lesbian, and affirming/non-affirming. The American Psychological Association defines “sexual orientation” as “an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes.

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<sup>7</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 4.



Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this paper, I will use "gay/lesbian" rather than "homosexual" to refer to individuals who identify as having emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to members of the same sex. When referring to the entire community who identifies with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation, I will use LGBTQ+.<sup>10</sup> Such labels will be avoided, whenever possible, to avoid anachronism. The current understanding of the terms gay/lesbian and homosexual are recent developments, and misleading to label ancient peoples with these modern terms. I will avoid using the term homosexual for two additional reasons:

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<sup>9</sup> The American Psychological Association, "Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality"; <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx> (accessed December 15, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hulshof-Schmidt, on the "Social Justice for All" blog, has an informative post explaining the complex acronym designating the non-heterosexual community. His blog states the current acronym LGBTQQIP2SAA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, 2 Spirit People, Asexual, Ally. Michael Hulshof-Schmidt, "What's in an acronym? Parsing the LGBTQQIP2SAA community," *Social Justice for All* (July 11, 2012); <https://hulshofschmidt.wordpress.com/2012/07/11/whats-in-an-acronym-parsing-the-lgbtqqip2saa-community/> (accessed December 15, 2016).

1. The modern community uses gay/lesbian as a self-referent for those who have a same-sex orientation.
2. The term homosexual carries a negative connotation since opponents use terms such as “homosexual tendency” or “homosexual lifestyle” to characterize LGBTQ+ people.

In the debate about whether God sanctions gay/lesbian relationships, one may identify two distinct groups, those who believe God does sanctions consensual, monogamous, loving gay/lesbian relations and those who believe God forbids them. To identify the two different groups of people in the debate, I will adopt the terminology *affirming* and *non-affirming* to designate the different sides.<sup>11</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

To express my argument, I will adopt the “Three Worlds” framework utilized by Sandra M. Schneiders in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New*

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<sup>11</sup> Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 24. I echo Sprinkle’s concerns with the use of the term *non-affirming* when he says “the one thing I do not like about *non-affirming* is that it feels to negative. There are many things that non-affirming people might *affirm* about gay people” (24). Nevertheless, I agree with Sprinkle that, until more precise terms are developed, affirming and non-affirming are the better options.

*Testament as Sacred Scripture*.<sup>12</sup> Schneiders organizes her framework as such: the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text. I separate these worlds from each other to expose certain assumptions modern scholars place on the text and to liberate the text from these assumptions. For example, Romans 1:26–27 must be situated in a cultural context which differs from that of the twenty-first-century; by separating these worlds, I can attempt to understand the context in which Romans was written and better apply it to the contemporary world.

The primary critical approach I will be employing falls under Schneiders category of *ideology critical approaches*. Schneiders defines ideology “as the thought world which is generated by and supportive of a particular power agenda, which is usually only visible to those excluded from the power system.”<sup>13</sup> She identifies two strands of ideological criticism, the first concerned with the ideology in the text and second with the ideology of the interpreters. For this project, I am concerned both with Paul’s ideology in Romans 1:18–27 and the ideology of the interpreters who use this text to marginalize the LGBTQ+ population.

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<sup>12</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 120.

Schneiders rightly observed the Bible was produced and has been interpreted almost exclusively by the “historical winners” who, deliberately or inadvertently, have made history and interpretation serve their interests at the expense of the “losers.” She further emphasized that, “For almost the entire two thousand years of [Christian] history, the New Testament has been tied to the ideological agenda of religiously powerful, educated, economically secure, Caucasian males.” An equally important gender characteristic is the heteronormative tendency of those interpreters.

Many scholars, Schneiders included, employ what is called the “hermeneutic of suspicion.” The hermeneutic of suspicion requires a critical look at both the text itself and the way in which interpreters have viewed the text to uncover meaning innate to the text and the meaning later interpreters have placed on it. For the last fifty years, Romans 1:26–27 has been read as a condemnation of the LGBTQ+ community. This interpretation has become so ingrained in modern conservative scholarship and religious culture, it has supplanted what Paul said. The goal of the hermeneutic of suspicion becomes separating these interpretations and then analyzing them against the backdrop of the pertinent historical evidence and the ancient and contemporary cultural trends. I will employ the hermeneutic of suspicion by (1) looking at the historical

framework of the text, (2) analyzing the text itself, and then (3) reconfiguring an interpretation based on the aforementioned analysis. My primary questions concern (1) the ancient understandings of “nature” and “homosexuality”; (2) how those understandings affected Paul’s ideology in his correspondence to the Romans; and (3) how modern interpreters have misinterpreted and misused this passage.

The world behind the text according to Schneiders is “concerned with what gave rise to the text and with the relationship of these factors to the text itself.”<sup>14</sup> This section will explore the first of the questions proposed above, namely the ancient understandings and how those understandings affected Paul.

The next section will cover Schneiders’ category “the world of the text,” which she describes as “a rubric for talking about the content of the text as witness and the form of the text as linguistic and textual.”<sup>15</sup> The primary function of the section will be to look at text itself and attempt to uncover what Paul’s words likely conveyed to the original audience.

The final section of this project will discuss the world “in front of the text,” critically understanding the “issue of how the text and reader interact in the

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<sup>14</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 151.

experience of biblical revelation.”<sup>16</sup> In this section, I will focus on the modern notions of “homosexuality” as an orientation and bring this into conversation with the text, Since Paul did not have a concept of sexual orientation, and his words must be read with twenty-first-century advancement in mind. This reading of the text is not attempting to extract meaning by the application of method, nor is it yielding to a blind submission to what the text says. However, it is a dialogue with the text, a “dialogue [which] is never-ending because of the text’s surplus of meaning, which allows it to generate an effective history in interaction with the historical consciousness of the believing community.”<sup>17</sup> It is not my intent to dismiss Paul and criticize him for saying things in his own time; my intention is to understand how Paul’s message might be handled 2000 years later.

Within this final section I will situate this passage with my understanding of Queer Biblical Studies. Queer Biblical Studies, as I conceptualize it, seeks to understand the Bible with the goal of creating a physical space in the contemporary world in which all persons, no matter their gender or sexual orientation, may achieve their fullest potential. This creation of a physical space

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<sup>16</sup> Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 157.

<sup>17</sup>Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 177.

will inherently challenge the conventional framework and call for a reinterpretation of certain texts that give power to the few to dominate and condemn. This power dynamic contrasts with the coming of the Kingdom of God, where all persons have a place and are welcomed. My ultimate goal in this paper is to provide the theoretical grounding to create a social space, within a Christian context, for the flourishing of the LGBTQ+ community. I seek to challenge the conventional hetero-patriarchal interpretations to reclaim the rich message of Paul in his letter to the Romans, and appropriate the text to build up the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This conceptualization of Queer Biblical Studies draws upon the works of Gerard Loughlin, What Is Queer? Theology after Identity, “*Theology & Sexuality* 14, no. 2 (2008): 143–52 (doi:10.1177/1355835807087376) and David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

## THE WORLD *BEHIND* THE TEXT

The scholarly community generally accepts Paul as the author of the Letter to the Romans. “There is [also] a broad consensus that Paul dictated the letter from Corinth or its vicinity in the period immediately before departing on the final trip to Jerusalem to deliver the offerings from the gentile churches.”<sup>19</sup> I will adopt the date of composition of Romans *per* Robert Jewett, who states with “a relatively high degree of probability that Romans was drafted in the winter of 56–57 or the early spring of 57.”<sup>20</sup>

With the date of 56–57 being adopted, the most immediate context for the composition of Romans becomes the reigns of the Emperors Claudius (41–54 CE) and Nero (54–68 CE). Claudius’ wife, Messalina, was known for her sexual promiscuity. The most notorious legend surrounding Messalina is that she partook in an all-night competition with a prostitute to see who could sleep with the most men; according to Pliny the Elder, Messalina won with 25 partners.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary on Romans*, Hermeneia: A Critical & Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 10.83, John Bostock, trans. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1855); <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D10%3Achapter%3D83> (accessed December 13, 2016).



Suetonius reports, Claudius “[found] that, besides her other shameful debaucheries, she had even gone so far as to marry in his own absence Caius Silius.”<sup>22</sup> This became the impetus for Claudius’ divorce of her. Claudius then married his niece Julia Agrippina, a marriage that would have been considered incestuous had he not “got someone to propose at the next meeting of the senate, that they should oblige the emperor to marry Agrippina...and that future liberty should be given for such marriages.”

Nero ascended to the throne in 54 CE after the death of Claudius and the intervention of his mother, Agrippina. Nero “was celebrated as the glorious leader who would usher in yet another Golden Age.”<sup>23</sup> The beginning of Nero’s reign was marked with generosity, for example “the more burthensome taxes he either entirely took off or diminished.”<sup>24</sup> However, history proved Nero to be a terrible ruler, upon whose death “the public joy was so great ... that the common

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<sup>22</sup> Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Claudius* (Philadelphia: Gebbie, 1889), 26; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0132%3A1ife%3Dcl> (accessed December 13, 2016)

<sup>23</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Nero*, (Philadelphia: Gebbie, 1889), 10; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0132%3A1ife%3Dnero> (accessed December 13, 2016).

people ran about the city with caps<sup>25</sup> upon their head.”<sup>26</sup> According to Suetonius, Nero’s vices gained strength by degrees, his “petulancy, lewdness, luxury, avarice, and cruelty, he practiced at first with reserve and in private, as if prompted to them only by the folly of youth,”<sup>27</sup> but later, Nero laid “aside his jocular amusements, and all disguise; breaking out into enormous crimes, without the least attempt to conceal them.”

The Nero administration, according to Jewett, “[provided] an exemplary form of government and law enforcement, despite the profligate personal habits of Nero himself ... who enjoyed stalking the streets of Rome with his crowd of sycophants demanding sexual services from passersby [male and female] and indulging in brawls and petty thieving.”<sup>28</sup> Alongside Nero’s sexual exploits and other vices the Roman civic cult would have influenced the writing of the letter to the Romans. “Several aspects of the civic cult are reflected in the way the argument of the Epistle to the Romans proceeds. It begins with a description of

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<sup>25</sup> This may refer to different reasons why Romans wore caps as a mark of celebration. For example, freed slaves would wear a cap that signified their liberation. Romans also wore caps to festivals; thus this refer to a festival celebrating the death of the emperor.

<sup>26</sup> Suetonius *Nero*, 57.

<sup>27</sup> Suetonius, *Nero*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 47–48.

divine wrath against those who seek to suppress the truth (1:18) and worship the creature rather than the Creator (1:25).”<sup>29</sup>

Having reviewed the historical facts and events which may have shaped this discourse to the Romans, we can now turn to the specific ideological concepts that would have affected Paul worldview: the honor/glory of humans in the Roman world, the meaning of φύσις (*physis*); and finally, phallogocentric dominance in the Roman world.

#### **HONOR/GLORY OF THE HUMAN (CREATURE) IN THE ROMAN WORLD**

The quest for honor/glory in the Roman society colors how Paul addresses the church in Rome. “The competition for honor was visible in every city of the Roman Empire in which members of the elite competed for civic power through sponsoring games and celebrations, financing public buildings, endowing food distributions, and so on. The public life in the Roman Empire was centered in the quest for honor.”<sup>30</sup> The Romans’ claim of superior honors for themselves and their rulers gave more validity to Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–32, in the Jewish/Christian eyes of those listening to Paul’s letter. The Romans “were firmly convinced that the gods had ‘exalted this great empire of Rome to the highest

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<sup>29</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 50.

point yet reached on earth' because of its superior virtue."<sup>31</sup> This facet of Roman culture plays direct role in understanding Rom 1:18–32 especially verses 26–27.

#### WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ΦΥΣΙΣ?

Moving forward, Paul uses the phrase μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν ... τὴν παρὰ φύσιν, "they exchanged the natural ... for what is alongside nature" (Rom 1:26). The question becomes, what does Paul mean when he uses the phrase "what is natural?"

Modern scholars, such as Brendan Byrne and Craig Williams attempt to answer this question. Brendan Byrne states, "The language reflects the conventional Stoic sense of 'nature' as the established order of things." This is further emphasized with one of the traditional Jewish accounts of creation, "Male and Female he created them" (Gen 1:27). "In the Jewish adaptation of such [Stoic] ideas reflected in this text a more, theological note may be present: such behavior is contrary to the design inserted into the natural order by the Creator."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, who establishes this order of things? Also, when attempting to understand the established order, how much of what is said compares to the modern notions of nature?

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<sup>31</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 69.

The assumptions made by Byrne concerning nature fail to consider the cultural attributes of the word φύσις. Craig A. Williams, elucidates the cultural characteristics when writing on the issue of nature in his book *Roman Homosexuality*. Williams writes,

Within the Latin textual tradition ... *natura* sometimes refers to the way things generally are, that is, observable patterns in the world around us; sometimes to the way they should be, that is, the reconstructed dictates of some transcendent perspective; and sometimes to the characteristic and inherent qualities of some specific being, that is, the nature of something; and much the same can be said of the concept of 'nature' in other cultural settings.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, the understanding what is natural, becomes more difficult because of the array of meaning this word generates. To illustrate the point of the wide range of meanings of *natura* or φύσις and the cultural reliance this word had, Williams cites ancient authors such as Cicero (106 BCE–43 BCE) and Martial (38 BCE–40 CE).<sup>34</sup> Cicero believed simply walking backwards or walking on one's hands was contrary to nature, and "that certain ways of sitting down and moving around, characteristic of 'wanton or soft men,' are unnatural."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2010), 270.

<sup>34</sup> While not strictly contemporaries of Paul, Cicero would have been known to Paul and Martial and the culture of Paul and Martial would have been similar enough to gain some insight.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 270.

Martial gives a joking account where he is scolding a man for caressing a boy's genitals. Martial believes this will hasten the maturation process and therefore make the boy no longer useful for pederasty. "Trying to talk some sense into his friend, he makes an appeal to nature." Martial states, "Nature has divided the male into two parts: one was created for girls, the other for men. Use your part." Williams writes,

This is of course a joke, but precisely for that reason it is a valuable indication of common assumptions in Martial's readership: the notion that a boy's anus was designed by nature to be penetrated by men must have made sense, and cannot have seemed outrageous or perverse.<sup>36</sup>

In recap, what was considered unnatural to Cicero may not be considered unnatural today (e.g., walking backwards or on one's hands). In Martial's example, what was considered "natural" then would today constitute a criminal offense.

#### PAUL AND ORIENTATION

The concept of sexual orientation encompasses emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Dan O. Via expounds on this definition by saying "a sexual orientation means a proclivity or predisposition that is given and not deliberately chosen or subject to the will of

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 273.

the individual.”<sup>37</sup> The concept of sexual orientation developed only in the modern period. Romans 1:26–27 does not address this issue, since such a concept is foreign to an ancient understanding of sexuality. Jeramy Townsley identifies the problem when today’s readers view the passage “with our binaries of heterosexual/homosexual and other sexual identities defined solely by the genders of the partners.” In the ancient mindset, sex always involved status differences, regulating who could penetrate whom, regardless of gender.<sup>38</sup>

The patriarchal structure of society needs to be taken into consideration to understand the ancient Greco-Roman world’s view of sex. Johannes Vorster addresses this issue in “The Making of Male Same-Sex in the Graeco-Roman World and Its Implications for the Interpretation of Biblical Discourses,”<sup>39</sup> where he discusses phallocentrism in the Greco-Roman world, and outlines the significant roles that power and social class play in determining the “naturalness” of sex. “Sex in antiquity was determined by a rigidly engendered social

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<sup>37</sup> Dan O. Via and Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 15.

<sup>38</sup> Jeramy Townsley, “Queer Sects in Patristic Commentaries on Romans 1:26–27: Goddess Cults, Free Will, and ‘Sex Contrary to Nature’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2012): 60.

<sup>39</sup> Johannes Vorster, “The Making of Male Same-Sex in the Graeco-Roman World and Its Implications for the Interpretation of Biblical Discourse,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 432–54.

hierarchy in which the penetrating phallus functioned as the primary signifier of cultural privilege and power."<sup>40</sup> Vorster goes on to say, "'sexing' did not take place according to anatomical difference, but was constituted by the power of the penetrating phallus."<sup>41</sup>

Williams enumerates two general "rules" Roman men were meant to follow regarding sex with either men or women. The first concerned the position men were to take: in any sexual act: men were required to take the penetrative role.<sup>42</sup> If an adult man opted to take the receptive role, he would be forfeiting his manhood. It "was simply assumed that sexual penetration reflected and reinforced male superiority over women [and those of lesser social class], so that a male who submitted to being penetrated had compromised his masculinity...."<sup>43</sup> The second dealt with possible sexual partners. Apart from his wife, freeborn Romans, male or female, were forbidden sexual partners for men.<sup>44</sup> Citizen-males in certain situations could take anyone who was not a citizen, especially his own slaves, and use them for his sexual pleasure, and those

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<sup>40</sup> Vorster, "Making," 436.

<sup>41</sup> Vorster, "Making," 436.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox, 2012), 552.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 19.



individuals had no legal power to protect themselves. These general rules do not show a cultural disdain for intercourse with any specific sex. They do, however, show that sex was a *tool for domination* and both represented and reinforced the Roman social hierarchy.

Timothy Dailey proposes that ancients, including Paul, had a conception of orientation. In support of his theory, Dailey cites Plato's *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes tells a mythic tale of human origins in which the human being was split into two parts. In the tale, humans had two sets of genitals; one individual could have a set of both male and female parts, both male parts, or both female. Zeus and the other Gods grew jealous and split the humans in two, where each had only set of genitals. This story showed why some men go after men and some women after women: each person was looking for its "other half."<sup>45</sup> Plato, through this story, documents his observations of the world around him, but there is no evidence to suggest he understood "sexual orientation" as understood today. To imply this constitutes an anachronism.

The normalcy of same-sex sexual relations in the Greco-Roman world can be seen in the abundance of vase and wall paintings depicting this behavior.

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<sup>45</sup> Timothy Dailey, *The Bible, the Church and Homosexuality: Exposing the 'Gay' Theology* (Washington, DC: The Family Research Council, 2004): 18.

Other archaeological evidence also shows to what extent this social practice was seen as normal and culturally acceptable. "Officially Roman law deemed same-sex intercourse among citizens as *stuprum*, a criminal act."<sup>46</sup> However, "Romans tolerated same-sex relations with non-citizens of all ages."<sup>47</sup> This included slaves or freedmen who were not citizens (*peregrini*).

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<sup>46</sup> William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes toward Sexuality in Early Jewish Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2013) 136.

<sup>47</sup> Loader, *Making Sense of Sex*, 136.

## THE WORLD OF THE TEXT

### ROMANS 1:18–23

Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπὸ οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων, διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς, ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφάνερωσεν. τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθορᾶται, ἢ τε ἄϊδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογήτους, διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠὲ χαρίστησαν, ἀλλὰ ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία: φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν, καὶ ἠλλάξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνης φθαροῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ πετεινῶν καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἐρπετῶν.

<sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all impiety and human injustice, who obscure the truth in injustice.<sup>19</sup>Because the knowledge of God is apparent among them, for God made it plain <sup>20</sup>from the creation of the world the invisible things of God have been understood and discerned clearly, both the eternal power and the divinity, so that they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>even though they know they do not glorify or give thanks to God as God, but they became futile on their reasoning and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise they became fools <sup>23</sup>and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God with a likely image of a perishable human, bird, quadruped and reptile.

Verses 18–23 list injustices of a humanity apart from the true God.<sup>48</sup> Paul seems to be employing a rhetorical *topos* rather than commenting on what he has observed or rumors he has heard. “Supporting this is the striking parallel between its content and that of tracts against Gentile idolatry to be found in

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<sup>48</sup> Since Paul uses the word ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*; humanity) as opposed to ἔθνος or Ἑλληνικός (*Ethnos* or *Hellenikos*; Gentile or Greek), he appears to be addressing a group of unbelieving Gentiles.

contemporary Jewish literature, most notably in the Wisdom of Solomon.”<sup>49</sup> Origen (185–254 CE) reads this passage to mean, “For this reason God’s judgement is just on those, who before the coming of Christ could have known God but instead turned away from [God] and fell into worshiping images of [humans] and animals.”<sup>50</sup> This is echoed in Apollinaris of Laodicea (310–390 CE) who comments “that although the visible creation was sufficient to reveal the invisible God, they nevertheless abandoned God and deified creatures instead....”<sup>51</sup> Paul may be talking about a broad category of unbelievers, but those hearing his words in Rome would most likely have thought of non-Christian Gentiles in their immediate context. This is further reinforced when the civic cult is taken into consideration, which honors the emperor as *divi filius*.

Verses 18–27 speak of the present actualization of God’s wrath. Paul asserts that the group in question did not recognize the truth of God, whose qualities were revealed through creation. God’s self-revelation leaves humanity with no excuse for denying proper worship. This punished group, “while in possession of this universal and elemental knowledge about God, have not

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<sup>49</sup> Byrne, *Romans*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 35.

<sup>51</sup> Bray, *Romans*, 35.

responded by glorifying God or thanking [God], but have turned to the worship of idols of their own invention.”<sup>52</sup>

In verse 21a, Paul states διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠὲ χαρίστησαν, “for knowing God they did not glorify God or give thanks.”

Knowing his audience was the Church in Rome, Paul wrote about how the Roman society’s concern with giving glory to the creature as opposed to the creator.

[The Romans] used the term *gloria* to describe the aura that “arises from a person’s successfully exhibiting himself<sup>53</sup> to others, particularly in victorious political or military leadership. Such glory was viewed as intrinsic to the heroic person, raising that person above the level of others.”<sup>54</sup>

This would have been in direct contrast to the Jewish vein of Paul’s thinking. As Jewett continues, “In contrast to Jewish thought, which reserved ‘glory’ largely for descriptions of God, the Romans virtually restricted *gloria* to superior human accomplishments.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Paul, in this section would be condemning not only the imperial cult, but also other ways of glorifying humans instead of God,

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 205.

<sup>53</sup> “Himself” here is correct since women were not eligible for such public honors.

<sup>54</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 49.

<sup>55</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 49.

essentially raising humans to the divine level. This condemnation follows Paul's claim that the qualities of the true God can be found in the created world, "for from the creation of the world the invisible things of God have been understood and discerned clearly, both the eternal power and the divinity" and yet the people, as in verse 23, "exchanged the glory of the immortal God with a likely image of a perishable human, bird, quadruped and reptile. beings and birds and animals and reptiles."<sup>56</sup>

#### ROMANS 1:24-27

Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς, οἵτινες μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει, καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὅς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας· ἀμήν. Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας· αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετήλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν, ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν

<sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them over to the cravings of their hearts, to impurity, dishonoring their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup>these same ones, exchange the truth of God with to lie, worshiping and serving the creature instead of the creator. To whom be praised throughout the ages. AMEN <sup>26</sup>For this God handed them over to dishonorable passions, for their women exchange the natural relations for those [alongside] nature. <sup>27</sup>Likewise, men

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<sup>56</sup> This is where Robert Gagnon, a vocal non-affirming scholar, misunderstands the text. Gagnon states, "nothing in the language of Romans 1:24-27 suggests that 'homosexuality' is a chosen condition of constitutional heterosexuals." As was made clear above, the text clearly shows that the "same-sex" passions are a cause of idolatrous behavior, in other words God is causing this to happen or letting it continue, and therefore has no bearing on sexuality at all. (Dan O. Via and Robert Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003].)

<p>φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας  ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς  ἀλλήλους ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν, τὴν  ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν  ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν  ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες</p>	<p>abandon the natural relations with  women to be inflamed with lust for  one another, men with men,  committing the shameless deeds  and receiving among themselves the  necessary penalty of their error.<sup>57</sup></p>
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Paul divided his argument in Romans 1:18-32 into two distinct sections.

The first answers *why* the wrath of God is being revealed; in the “second, he describes *how* the wrath of God is being revealed in the present time.”<sup>58</sup> The second half of the argument is further divided into three subsections, each of which Paul denotes by using the phrase *παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς* “God gave them over....” The first states God gave them over to “to the cravings of their hearts, to impurity, dishonoring their bodies among themselves.” The second is the giving over to “dishonorable passions.” The final, “to a base mind, to do things that are not proper.”

<p>WHY God’s Wrath is Present  (Romans 1:18–23)</p>	<p>HOW is God’s wrath being revealed?  (Romans 1:24–32)</p>
<p>For the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all impiety and human injustice, who obscure the truth in injustice...</p>	<p>to the cravings of their hearts, to impurity, dishonoring their bodies among themselves to dishonorable passions to a base mind, to do things that are not proper</p>

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<sup>57</sup> All translations are the author’s unless otherwise stated.

<sup>58</sup> Frank Matera, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 47; emphasis added.

## THE WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

The United States Supreme Court ruling to allow same-sex “marriage,”<sup>59</sup> the Pulse Nightclub shooting,<sup>60</sup> and the proposed “Bathroom Bills”<sup>61</sup> are just some of the cultural influences an American biblical scholar brings to texts like Romans 1:26–27. The culture of the United States is always changing and the ever-growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals is causing some Christian backlash. Those individuals arm themselves with scripture, using it to condemn and ostracize the LGBTQ+ community. The first two sections of this project sought to analyze Romans 1:18–27 to understand *what* Paul was saying *within* the context in which he wrote. The results show that the conception of sex and the roles of the respective partners differs drastically from today’s world. Sexuality today is used not as a means for domination, but rather as a means of mutual

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<sup>59</sup> “Obergefell v. Hodges.” *SCOTUSBlog* (web log June 26, 2015); <http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/obergefell-v-hodges/> (accessed June 29, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Dan Berry, “Realizing It’s a Small, Terrifying World After All: The Orlando massacre turned a sanctuary of fantasy and escape into a sobering scene all too familiar in America,” *The New York Times* (June 20, 2016); <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/21/us/orlando-shooting-america.html> (accessed June 29, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> General Assembly of North Carolina. *SESSION LAW 2016-3 HOUSE BILL 2*. <http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/PDF/H2v4.pdf>. (Accessed June 29, 2017).



love and respect. The use of sex as a means for domination constitutes rape or domestic abuse, both of which are criminal offences where the victim has the right to prosecute to perpetrator.

With this in mind, this section of the project seeks to re-contextualize this Pauline text for the present, using a queer liberationist hermeneutic. Queer biblical studies, as I conceptualize it, seeks to bring the non-affirming, the LGBTQ+, and the affirming non-LGBTQ+ into conversation and, as I said previously, to create a new social space for the expression and inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The APA defines a “sexual orientation” as an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction. I will use this definition to show that Paul could not have had a notion of orientation when he wrote Rom 1:26–27. “Emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction” cannot be applied to the Roman context where sexual contact was hierarchal and domination oriented. Sexual relations—whether heterosexual or same-sex—constituted displays of power rather than acts between two consenting adults.

Another aspect of modern sexual expression which needs be considered is “consensual sex, which is defined as, “words or overt actions by a person who is legally or functionally competent to give informed approval, indicating a freely

given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact.”<sup>62</sup> The ancient Roman worldview saw two classes of people, citizen and non-citizen, and even further male and not-male. The citizen male had the right to do what he pleased with his property, allowing him to have sex with his slaves, male or female. Citizen-males could do as they pleased with anyone who was of a lower social class, who would have difficult time refusing the advances of a citizen. As has been stated, sex is about dominance and power, therefore it did not matter if the object of desire for the citizen-male gave consent or not. There is no element of consent here; most if not all the same-sex sexual relations in the ancient world could be classified as rape. Therefore, Paul’s condemnation makes sense because these actions did not grow in service of the gospel.<sup>63</sup> The act of domination of one human over another is condemned throughout Paul’s gospel, and he consistently preaches against the Roman social hierarchy, part of which governs sexuality.

How then should one respond to Paul words? Paul is not talking about two consenting adults who hold a same-sex orientation, since the definition of

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<sup>62</sup>National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, *Sexual Violence Surveillance Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), 19; [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv\\_surveillance\\_definitions-2009-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv_surveillance_definitions-2009-a.pdf) (accessed June 28, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> Though the language of Romans 1:18–27 does not mention forced sexual contact, with the modern definitions these relations are conceivably rape.

orientation cannot be applied to the ancient world. The ancient world's conception of sex being domination orientated as opposed to life-giving gives new meaning to this passage, Paul's prohibition applies to rape and pederasty, not to sexual contact based on consent and equality. Thus, this passage should be placed in the same category as those concerning slavery and should be set aside.

The current reading of this text as tool of condemnation of the LGBTQ+ community is an evil interpretation, which conforms to the present "evil age" because it is used as a tool for dominating a group of individuals, and does not seek to include the marginalized, as Jesus did throughout his ministry. This is paralleled in the passages concerning slavery, which American slave-owners used to dominate and control the slave population. Appropriating this passage as a critique of a rape culture or homophobia is more appropriate, because this passage denounces those who adhere to a culture of domination as opposed to a culture of love.

Furthermore, one can argue that sex and sexuality are not the focus of this text. Paul is not condemning sexual expression; he is condemning idolatry. Paul then shows how one can see idolatry in the world by citing the sexual profligacy of the Roman people. In other words, any time a dominant group (heterosexuals)

seeks to oppress and subordinate any other group (LGBTQ), commits the sin of idolatry according to Paul's message.

With that in mind, how can one see the effects of idolatry in the modern American context? One may observe religious heterosexism, where a majority religious heterosexual population dominates the minority LGBTQ+ population through laws and degrading rhetoric; nationalism, where one group of people identifying strongly with a nation of origin dominate immigrants and foreign occupants of a country by physically assaulting them or mentally degrading them<sup>65</sup>; sexism, where a male population dominates females through humiliating words and actions,<sup>66</sup> just to name a few. Idolatry of any sort—deifying religious texts, nation of origin, or individuals based on genitalia—places those “things” before the worship of God, which is what Paul is condemning in Romans 1.

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<sup>65</sup> Janell Ross, “From Mexican rapists to bad hombres, the Trump campaign in two moments,” *The Washington Post* (October 20, 2016); <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/20/from-mexican-rapists-to-bad-hombres-the-trump-campaign-in-two-moments> (accessed June 29, 2017.) This article from the *Washington Post* discusses Donald Trump stereotyping Mexicans as drug dealers and rapists.

<sup>66</sup> Deborah Tannen, “Donald Trump Used Sexism to Attack Hillary Clinton. He Lost,” *Time* (October 10, 2016); <http://time.com/4524957/presidential-debate-donald-trump-sexism/> (accessed June 29, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Many contemporary Christians who use Romans 1:26–27 to condemn the LGBTQ+ population, fail to understand the cultural dynamics of the text, the text itself, and the contemporary world. Such a literalistic and ahistorical reading of Romans 1:26–27 imposes a contemporary cultural context wholly different than the one in which Paul wrote. The present notion of “homosexuality” as an innate orientation was a concept unknown to Paul and his contemporaries.

This project understands Paul’s message in Rom 1:26–27 first by situating it with an appreciation of the modern notion of homosexuality as well as an understanding of Paul’s historical context and purpose, which was then brought into conversation with today’s context. My intention was to re-examine this passage within its historical and ideological context, to elucidate what Paul was trying to communicate to his first-century audience and reinterpret it for a twenty-first-century audience. As I have proven, one cannot claim Paul understood the modern notions of “orientation” when writing Romans 1:18–27, since the understanding of sexual orientation is a contemporary development. This text does not deal with sexuality but with idolatry; which I have shown and further contextualized within a twenty-first-century American setting. When one analyzes this text with those factors in mind, it becomes clear that there is no

justification for using this text to condemn consensual same-sex relationships. Paul understood that sexual interactions should fulfill the gospel message of love, so he condemned the Roman mentality of sex, which was equivalent to patriarchal domination, as having no place in a post-resurrection society.

The project of liberating the LGBTQ+ community from religious hatred and scorn is far from over. This project is just one attempt to turn the tides toward loving acceptance. Using this project as a stepping stone, I suggest future scholars take the framework found in this paper and apply it to re-contextualize other Hebrew and Christian canonical texts in the Bible. Another avenue for inquiry takes an exegetical approach to the passages in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, looking at the biblical evidence which the Church employs and re-contextualizing it to show how the Catholic Church should reformulate its teaching and theology to support LGBTQ+ individuals. If the Church fully welcomes LGBTQ+ individuals, a bridge will be constructed for wider acceptance among the whole of the Catholic world.

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