

# More Reasons Why Stacy Johnson's *A Time to Embrace* Should Not Be Embraced: Part II: Sodom, Leviticus, and More on Jesus and Paul

**Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor of New Testament  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
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My critical review article on Stacy Johnson's book *A Time to Embrace* for the *Scottish Journal of Theology* was limited to about 8000 words.<sup>1</sup> As such it was not possible to include large amounts of additional critique. This essay deals with a number of subjects that could not be addressed in that review, though readers should not regard even this as completing the critique. There are too many inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and instances of failed logic to record them all. This essay treats only Johnson's mistreatment of biblical texts not covered in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* article; specifically: (1) the story of Sodom and related texts; (2) the Levitical prohibitions of man-male intercourse; (3) the witness of Jesus (only barely touched on in the *SJT* article); (4) the witness of Paul in 1 Cor 6:9 (ditto); and (5) the witness of Paul in Rom 1:24-27 (ditto). (For discussion of issues of science, nature, history, and logic in Johnson's book, see "Part III" at <http://robgagnon.net/homosexStacyJohnsonMoreReasons3.htm>.)

## I. Johnson on the Story of Sodom and Related Texts

Johnson dismisses the Sodom and Levite-at-Gibeah narratives as speaking against *only* same-sex rape, the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic *qedeshim* texts (feminized male cult figures serving as passive-receptive partners in male-male intercourse) as rejecting *only* cultic prostitution, Ezek 16:49 as identifying *only* callousness toward the poor as Sodom's sin, and Jude 7 (cf. 2 Pet 2:6-10) condemning *only* the Sodomites' "desire to force sexual relations with angelic beings" (44-45, 49, 263 n. 9, 264 n. 14).

All of these presumptions I have already refuted extensively elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Since Johnson gives not the slightest indication that he has read anything that I have written on

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<sup>1</sup> "A Book Not To Be Embraced: A Critical Review Essay on Stacy Johnson's *Time to Embrace*" (<http://robgagnon.net/articles/homosexStacyJohnsonSJT2.pdf>), scheduled to be published in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62:1 (2009); critiquing William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 63-110; *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (with Dan O. Via; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 56-60; "Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to Myers and Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?*" *Reformed Review* 59 (2005): 46-50 (online: [http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon\\_autm05\\_0.pdf](http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon_autm05_0.pdf)); "Old Testament and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of the Case Made by Phyllis Bird," *ZAW* 117 (2005): 370-78. Johnson doesn't even show any

these subjects—he certainly doesn’t address a single one of my counterarguments—there is no point here in restating at length what he has ignored. His first task is to begin reading so that he may become more broadly acquainted with the issues. I offer here only a few questions to stimulate his reading.

*On the Sodom narrative:* If someone told Johnson a story about a really bad town where adults raped their parents, would Johnson conclude that the storyteller was condemning only *forcible* incest? If not, why does he conclude that the story of Sodom in a broader cultural environment that is aware of (but still critical of) non-coercive forms of male-male intercourse, is indicting only forcible male-male intercourse?

*On the Deuteronomistic qedeshim texts:* Since ancient Near East texts that speak of parallel figures (the *assinnu*, *kurgarrû*, and *kulu’u*) hold such figures in disgust for their attempt at erasing their masculine stamp—both through appearance and through consensual anal-receptive intercourse—why would Johnson argue that the biblical writers are rejecting such figures only the grounds of cult and fees?

*On the Levite-at-Gibeah story:* If the Deuteronomistic Historian rejected the *qedeshim* for the same reasons, then isn’t it self-evident that the coercive dimension of the attempt at male-male rape in the Levite-at-Gibeah story is not the only offense being condemned?

*On Ezek 16:49:* If the vice list in Ezek 18:10-13 clearly distinguishes between the offense “oppresses the poor and needy” (fifth vice) from the offense “commits an abomination” (ninth vice), if elsewhere in Ezekiel “abomination” in the singular is used of sexual sin, and if Ezekiel knew and basically agreed with the Holiness Code or a precursor document (as all Ezekiel scholars acknowledge), including presumably the Holiness Code’s take on man-male intercourse, what grounds is there for contending that in Ezek 16:49 “committed an abomination” does not refer to the offense of man-male intercourse per se?

*On Jude 7 and 2 Pet 2:6-10:* If the entire history of interpretation of the Sodom story agrees that the Sodomites did not realize that the visitors were angels, how could the men of Sodom be held accountable for allegedly desiring sex with angels? Why can’t Jude 7 be read, consistent with most early Jewish interpretations of the Second Temple period and beyond, as: “in the course of attempting sexual immorality [i.e. intercourse with men] they [inadvertently] went after other flesh [i.e. angels]”?

That Johnson has not even acknowledged to his readers any of these questions, let alone satisfactorily answered them, is a revealing commentary on the quality and quantity of his research and/on his active intent to conceal from his readers information highly inconvenient to his own arguments.

## **II. Johnson on the Levitical Prohibitions: “Lying with a Male as though Lying with a Woman”**

Johnson’s treatment of the Levitical prohibitions of man-male intercourse (18:22; 20:13) is far and away his most researched discussion of scriptural texts, yet even this

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awareness that a number of scholars have understood the story of Ham’s offense against Noah as having to do with same-sex, incestuous rape (including Hermann Gunkel, Gerhard von Rad, Martti Nissinen, and myself).

effort is half-baked at best (124-29, endnotes on pp. 279-88).<sup>3</sup>

**Johnson's failed attempt at rejecting an incest analogue.** Johnson argues that because Levitical incest laws do not prohibit man-daughter and man-sister intercourse they are “based less on biology ... and more on social organization of families.” “Thus, when contemporary polemicists make repeated comparisons between same-gender sexuality and incest, they are telling us more about their own [infer: bigoted, hypocritical] agendas, than about the values of ancient Israel” (283 n. 52). Since Johnson in the same note cites approvingly from Jacob Milgrom's commentary on Leviticus (pp. 1526 and 1528), he misrepresents matters by not wanting readers to know of Milgrom's solution to the problem of no explicit citation of man-daughter, man-sister incest (pp. 1527-29).<sup>4</sup> Man-daughter and man-sister prohibitions are subsumed in the prohibition of intercourse with one's *nearest kin* in Lev 18:6: “no man shall approach any flesh (אִשָּׁה, *šəēr*) of his flesh (בְּשָׂרוֹ, *běšārô*) to uncover nakedness.”<sup>5</sup> Sex with one's mother is explicitly addressed in 18:7 only in order to establish that all other incestuous unions are a violation of one's mother or father. The remainder of the list in 18:8-18 shows which more distant kin-relations beyond mother, sister, and daughter are forbidden.<sup>6</sup> By not alerting readers to Milgrom's credible solution when otherwise citing the same section of Milgrom's commentary Johnson deceives his readers.<sup>7</sup>

**Johnson's failed attempt at claiming that the Levitical prohibitions reject only “humiliating” behavior.** Johnson contends that Lev 18:22 and 20:13 do not “explicitly prohibit forms of sexual expression such as mutual touching, holding hands, kissing, or even oral sex.” Yet then he has to admit that, anyway, Israel would not have “explicitly approved of these other forms of sexual expression” (126). If that is the case, though,

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<sup>3</sup> In the *Scottish Journal of Theology* article I dealt with Johnson's misguided argument that the term “abomination” (*tô'ēbā*) was commonly used by the Israelites for what we today would consider non-moral offenses. Like many other homosexualists, Johnson also cites the outdatedness of some of the legal material in the Levitical Holiness Code, including menstrual law and the mixing of different kinds of seed. However, Johnson never considers any of my arguments as regards differences in the severity of offenses, degree of absoluteness, symbolic quality, and carryover into the New Testament. See ““Are There Universally Valid Sex Precepts? A Critique of Walter Wink's Views on the Bible and Homosexuality,” *HBT* 24 (2002): 72-125, here pp. 100-103 (also online: <http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homoWinkHBTResp.pdf>); “Why the Disagreement,” 53-54.

<sup>4</sup> *Leviticus 17-22* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000). As Milgrom notes, even the Laws of Hammurabi and the Hittite Laws, which are less careful to proscribe incest than the Levitical Holiness Code, prohibit intercourse between a man and his daughter.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “any” in 18:6; also the description of “nearest kin” in 21:1-3.

<sup>6</sup> These include intercourse with one's half sister (18:9), stepsister (18:11), sister-in-law (18:16), granddaughter (18:10), and daughter-in-law (18:15). It makes no sense to argue that Lev 18 prohibits these secondary forms of incest but not intercourse with one's sister or daughter. In fact, even Johnson has to admit that Leviticus did not encourage such sexual relations but still insists, falsely, that in accounting for the omission one realizes that the incest laws were “not meant to target ‘incest’” on biological and moral grounds (282-83 n. 52). Yet the prohibited affine relationships exist only as an extension of prohibited, biological, nearest-kin relationships.

<sup>7</sup> As for Johnson's other argument that biblical characters did not keep the incest laws, most of the infractions mentioned by Johnson (and obtained from Milgrom) are not approved by the narrator. Some do pass without negative comment; for example, Abraham's marriage to his half sister, Sarah (Gen 20:12), Jacob's marriage to two sisters (Gen 29), and Amram's marriage to his aunt Jochebed (Exod 6:20). However, these took place, as Milgrom notes, before the law code was instituted. Moreover, none of the infractions transgress incest boundaries with nearest kin: adult-parent, parent-child, and brother-sister. Cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1528, 1536.

why make a point (as Johnson does) that only one act, “humiliating” behavior, is being rejected? Johnson rejects the parallel that I make with the prohibitions of incest (18:6-18) and adultery (18:20), which, if the parallel were correct, would imply that the prohibition of man-male intercourse has relevance for rejecting all erotic contact between two males, not just the particular act of sexual penetration.

On this point [namely, that erotic contact of any sort with near kin or one’s neighbor’s wife would be prohibited] Gagnon is surely right [note: this is the only instance in which Johnson acknowledges that I am right about anything!]. And this is the reason that, in the prohibitions on sexual relations with near relatives, a man is forbidden even to look on a woman’s nakedness (Lev. 18:6 ...). Yet no such further prohibition exists regarding same-gender relations. It is simply the one act that is condemned. (285 n. 58)

Johnson ignores the fact that the prohibition of adultery in Lev 18:20 uses the language of “lying,” not “seeing the nakedness of”: literally, “and to the wife of a community member you shall not give your lying for seed.” Surely this prohibition implies also the wrongness of any erotic contact with one’s neighbor’s wife, not just the penetrative act. Moreover, Johnson takes the expression “seeing the nakedness of” far too literally (cf. Milgrom: “This is another euphemism for ‘copulate’”).<sup>8</sup> That the expression is a metaphor for sexual intercourse is evident from the fact that, for a number of the incest prohibitions in Lev 18, Lev 20 substitutes “see the nakedness of” with “lie with” without any apparent difference in meaning (cf. 18:8 with 20:11; 18:15 with 20:12; 18:19 with 20:18; 18:14 with 20:20; 18:16 with 20:21). In Lev 20 there is no material difference in meaning between the prohibitions of “lying with” one’s stepmother, one’s daughter-in-law, or a male, on the one hand, and the prohibitions of “seeing the nakedness of” one’s sister, one’s aunt, or one’s brother’s wife, on the other hand. Indeed, for two prohibitions, Lev 20 combines the two phrases: “a man who lies with a sick [i.e. menstruating] woman and uncovers her nakedness” (20:18); “a man who lies with his uncle’s wife has uncovered the nakedness of his uncle” (20:20). In addition, Johnson overlooks the parallel use of the expression “saw the nakedness of” for Ham’s probable intercourse with his father Noah in Gen 9:20-27.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, even if there were a difference between the two expressions (which is unlikely), it would by no means follow that only anal penetration of another male was regarded as wrong. In our own culture, for example, while it is less offensive to *see* naked a person of the same sex than one of the other sex (or no offense at all), non-penetrative, erotic contact is more offensive with a person of the same sex than a person of the other sex. The idea that ancient Israel would have accepted oral sex or erotic fondling by a man of another male’s genitals is preposterous, as apparently even Johnson is forced to admit. We might presume that erotic gestures short of penetration in the cases of incest, adultery, and homoeroticism may have been subject to penalties less substantial than a capital sentence, but implicitly forbidden.

***Johnson’s failed argument from the absence of an explicit indictment of lesbianism.*** Johnson also argues that the fact that lesbianism is not indicted proves that “the concern is with protecting male dignity and not ... any particular marital ideal” (126). However, this argument makes an either-or out of a both-and. Moreover, it presumes the

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<sup>8</sup> *Leviticus 17-22*, 1534.

<sup>9</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 63-71.

historically absurd scenario that ancient Israelites would have approved of committed sexual relationships between females (note that in the later Greco-Roman milieu lesbian intercourse was widely thought to be far more offensive than man-male intercourse). The absence of an explicit condemnation of female-female intercourse is more likely due to the fact that such relations were virtually impossible, and thus largely unknown, given the tightly controlled sexual lives of women in the ancient Near East.<sup>10</sup>

***Johnson's failed main thesis that the prohibition is limited to exploitative forms.***

Johnson's main thesis is that "Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 do not prohibit every form of same-gender expression imaginable; instead, they prohibit a form of emasculating sexual behavior marked by dominance, exploitation, and humiliation" (154). From this thesis he makes three main arguments.

1. *Why the Levitical prohibitions cannot be confined to coercive forms of man-male intercourse.* According to Johnson, "the act in question was of the kind that a socially superior man usually imposed on a social inferior," "performed on a slave or other subordinate person merely as a form of sexual gratification" or on "prisoners of war as a form of sexual humiliation" and "abuse" (125-26). Johnson's mention of the examples of sex with male slaves and sex with prisoners of war, two instances of coercive man-male intercourse, overlooks the obvious fact that Lev 20:13 penalizes both participants on the grounds of mutual complicity: "the two of them . . . shall certainly be put to death; their blood be upon them." As with the prohibitions of adultery and incest, Lev 20 presumes that both parties are consenting and thus liable for participation (cf. 20:11-13, 27; Ezek 18:10-14; Deut 22:23-27). Consequently, the prohibition of man-male intercourse in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 cannot have one-sided exploitation of another primarily in view.

Furthermore, evidence from both Mesopotamia and Egypt indicates that non-coercive forms of homosexual practice were known in the ancient Near East.<sup>11</sup> For Johnson's argument to work, he has to presuppose the historically outlandish idea that the framers of the Holiness Code in Lev 17-26 (!) would have blessed a committed sexual union between two men. There is certainly no basis for such an idea in the history of interpretation of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 found in both early Judaism and early Christianity, which is unanimous in understanding the prohibition in an absolute sense.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 142-46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43-56.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Josephus explained to Gentile readers that "the law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman. . . . But it abhors the intercourse of males with males" (*Against Apion* 2.199). There are no limitations placed on the prohibition as regards age, slave status, idolatrous context, promiscuity, or exchange of money. The only limitation is the sex of the participants. According to *b. Sanh.* 54a, the male with whom a man lays in Lev 18.22 and 20.13 may be "an adult or minor," meaning that the prohibition of male-male unions is not limited to pederasty. In the Mishnah Rabbi Judah is said to have cautioned, "Two unmarried men may not sleep in the same cloak," though the majority of rabbinic authorities ("the sages") permitted this (*m. Qid.* 4:14). Did the majority permit this because they were more open to homosexual relations than Judah when it involved two men in a loving union? No, rather because, as *t. Qid.* 5:10 comments about this text, "Israel is not suspected." In other words, Israelites, unlike Gentiles, could be trusted not to engage in same-sex intercourse of any sort. The *only* known exception within three centuries of the life of Jesus, before or after, occurs ca. 300 C.E. when Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazzi caught two men having sex in an attic and wanted to charge them with a capital offense but lacked the required number of witnesses for a capital sentence (*y. Sanh.* 6.4, 23c). Cf. further: *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159-62, 167, 171-76. The apostle Paul clearly appropriated these prohibitions in his absolute indictment of homosexual practice. The term *arsenokoitai* ("men lying with a male") in 1 Cor 6.9 was formulated from the Greek version of Lev 18:22 and 20:13. In Rom 1.24-27

2. *Why the expression “lie with” does not imply a specific, non-absolute application.* Johnson further contends that the expression “lie with” refers specifically to sexual relationships that are promiscuous or coercive (rape) rather than loving and committed. He compares “lie with” to the vulgar English expression “get laid” and argues that its use in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 signals a condemnation only of non-committed male same-sex relationships. Johnson’s argument fails at two levels.

First, as even Johnson has to acknowledge, the expression “lie with” is not used in exclusively negative contexts, which suggests to most scholars that the expression has the neutral sense “have sexual intercourse with” (so *HALOT*; cf. Lev 15:18, 24; Gen 30:15; 2 Sam 11:11; 2 Sam 12:24).<sup>13</sup>

Second, even if there were any negative connotation to the expression “lie with,” its connection with man-male love could readily be explained by the fact that ancient Israelites viewed man-male love as inherently immoral, not by some attempt to distinguish between exploitative/promiscuous forms of man-male intercourse and committed forms. This is certainly the case as regards references to “lying with” one’s parent or step-parent, daughter-in-law, and animals (Gen 19:32-36; 35:22; 49:4; Exod 22:19; Lev 20:11-12; Deut 27:21). None of these uses of “lie with” speak of “only one kind of sexual act” rather than an act construed in an “absolute, sweeping, and universal” sense, as Johnson claims for the prohibition of man-male intercourse (128).

3. *Why misogyny is not the key that unlocks the Levitical prohibitions.* Johnson claims that the Levitical prohibitions are concerned “primarily” to “protect male dignity” by outlawing “transgression of the proper passive and active gender roles” (126, 128, 283 n. 53).<sup>14</sup> Penetrating a male would disgrace him by treating him as a “sexually subservient”

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Paul uses two Greek terms, “uncleanness” (*akatharsia*) and “indecenty” (*aschēmosunē*) that appear frequently in the discussion of sex laws in Lev 18 and 20 (LXX).

<sup>13</sup> Johnson’s attempts at obviating this point are not convincing (283-85 nn. 55-57). Leviticus 15:18 and 24 refer to temporary uncleanness “if a man lies with a woman” and the man has a seminal emission or the woman has her period. Since the laws hold for sexual intercourse in the context of the covenant of marriage the neutral meaning “has sexual intercourse with” applies. In 2 Sam 11:11 Uriah refuses to “lie with [his] wife” and thus incur uncleanness through seminal emission while consecrated for battle. Even if having intercourse with his wife at such a moment is inappropriate, the sense “get laid” is inappropriate for this context. 2 Samuel 12:24 states that after the death of the illicit offspring of David’s adulterous affair with Bathsheba and David’s acts of contrition, “David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon” (NRSV). Johnson claims that the “lying with” of v. 24 is “governed still by the illicit act of David lying with ‘the wife of Uriah’ in v. 11” (283 n. 55). Against this claim, however, is the fact that the text immediately goes on to state that “Yahweh loved” Solomon. David has also acted to console his wife. To read the expression “lie with” here in the sense of “got her (or: himself) laid” makes little sense of the context. Genesis 30:15 refers to Rachel giving Leah permission to “lie with” Jacob in exchange for Leah’s son’s mandrakes. The relationship is licit, even if Jacob is “hired out.” The sense is not “get laid by means of” but rather “have intercourse with.” Johnson says the “exceptions prove the rule” but he takes a totally different tact when only a page later he makes the exceptional problematic use of “abomination” the rule (285-86 n. 59).

<sup>14</sup> Johnson contradicts himself on this point. On p. 128 he contends that the Levitical “prohibition is possibly ... to keep Israelites from joining in pagan sexual customs, but primarily to preserve the sense of what it meant to be a man in Israelite society.” Yet on pp. 286-287 n. 60 he treats the former as “the most plausible reason” for the prohibition and the latter as only a “possibility.” Needless to say, positing a primary motive in “distinguishing Israel’s behavior from that of the cultic worship practices of the surrounding Canaanite people” (287 n. 60) does not help us to understand why Israel maintained some practices that were similar to Canaanite cults and not others (see further *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 129-32).

woman (126). Johnson utterly rejects “the possibility that Leviticus finds male-to-male sexual intercourse objectionable merely because it constitutes a departure from the anatomical ‘fit’ between ‘male and female’” (286 n. 60).

Yet even Johnson’s use of what I call a “misogyny theory” has to presuppose some notion of gender complementarity. Otherwise, why would Lev 18:22 and 20:13 identify the one who is penetrated as taking the place of a “woman”?<sup>15</sup> To put it bluntly, the fact that a woman’s vagina is the appropriate receptacle for a man’s penis must have *something* to do with this identification. Indeed, in a holistic sense, God has designed woman as the “counterpart” or “complement” of a man (*kěnegdô*), the missing element of a once indivisible sexual whole (so Gen 2:18-24 [J]; J attributes a husband’s rule over his wife to the Fall [3:16]). Even Johnson admits that the Levitical prohibition “is possibly in support of the command to be ‘fruitful and multiply’” (128; cf. 286 n. 60). This too speaks to some baseline notion of male-female sexual complementarity, certainly as regards procreative function, which in turn presupposes anatomical fit.

The priestly notion of creation “according to its kind” (Gen 1:11-12, 21, 24-25) also speaks to an understanding of structural conformity, as does the Holiness Code’s prohibition of breeding animals, sowing seed, or putting on a garment “of two kinds” (Lev 19:19). Although the prohibitions in Lev 19:19 strike us as quaint, the interdiction of incest and bestiality in Lev 18 and 20 does not. The latter shows concerns both for too much structural identity in a sexual merger (in the case of incest having intercourse with the “flesh [אָר, *šār*] of one’s flesh [בְּשָׂרוֹ, *běšārô*]”; 18:6) and for too little structural identity (in the case of bestiality an invalid sexual “mixing” of humans and animals [תֵּבֵל, *tebel*]; 18:23; 20:15-16). Neither of these two sets of prohibitions primarily has in view the maintenance of male hierarchical authority, which Johnson posits as the prime motive for the prohibition of man-male intercourse. Instead, structural considerations are primary. The same applies to the prohibition of sex with a menstruant, construed as a discordant mix of physiological functions (Lev 18:19; 20:18).<sup>16</sup>

Thus issues of structural congruity appear to be paramount in the prohibition of man-male intercourse, with any misogynistic overlay subsidiary at best. Even Johnson admits that Gen 1:27 rejects any attempt “to lessen the humanity” of women since it affirms that women too are made fully in God’s image (116).<sup>17</sup> If surrendering a dominant male

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<sup>15</sup> The texts literally read: “With a male you shall not lie (as the) lyings of a woman [i.e., as though lying with a woman]; it is an abomination” (18:22); “And a man who lies with a male (as the) lyings of a woman [i.e., as though lying with a woman], they have committed an abomination, the two of them.”

<sup>16</sup> A later image, which probably applies here, is that of a man who is trying to work the “field” by sowing “seed” when nature has already clearly signaled a time for the “field” to lie fallow in order to renew itself. For further discussion of connecting elements in the Levitical sex prohibitions and a critique of the misogyny argument see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 134-42; “The Old Testament and Homosexuality,” 383-85.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson contends that “the priestly tradition in the Bible ... uses the trope ‘male and female’ with some frequency” and, as in Gen 1:27, only in “the sense of ‘both male and female’ (Lev. 3:1, 6; 12:7; 15:33; 25:6, 44; 27:5, 6, 7)” without any connection to “sexual intercourse, let alone sexual anatomy” (286 n. 60). We have already noted in review article for *Scottish Journal of Theology* that Johnson is incorrect in his reading of Gen 1:27. Of the references that he cites from Leviticus none use the straightforward phrase “male and female.” Leviticus 3:1, 3:6, and 12:7 refer to “male *or* female”; 25:6 and 25:44 use the words עָבַד (‘*ebed*) and אִמָּה (‘*āmā*) rather than זָכָר (*zākār*) and נְקֵבָה (*neqēbā*); and 15:33 and 27:5-7 explicitly separate out the individual elements with a preposition (“this is the law *for* the male and *for* the female”).

social status were the real issue behind the proscriptions of Lev 18:22 and 20:13, we would expect the legislators of the Holiness Code to have made subversion of male hierarchy punishable by death, not just the “symptom” of homosexual intercourse. If status were the main concern rather than structure, we might wonder why the legislators did not permit, as The Middle Assyrian Laws seem to have done, high-status men to have sex with low-status males.<sup>18</sup> If the main concerns were the “dominance, exploitation, and humiliation” of the penetrated partner (126), we might wonder why the legislators did not permit consensual acts rather than condemn to death both parties. It seems, then, that the primary motive behind prohibiting man-male intercourse was the view that gender dimorphism was absolutely inviolable. A male is not, and never can be, a sexual complement to a man. To pretend otherwise is to commit sacrilege against God’s creation as “male and female.”<sup>19</sup>

A subpoint here is that Johnson appears not even to be aware that he has used two mutually exclusive arguments: a non-absolute exploitation argument and an absolute misogyny argument. In the conclusion to his book, he uses both arguments of *all* biblical texts that explicitly or implicitly prohibit homosexual practice:

The main argument made against gay couples is that their love violates certain biblical prohibitions. But those biblical prohibitions were addressed specifically to hedonistic or exploitative forms of sexual conduct, such as prostitution or the sexual exploitation of slaves, in which mutuality and concern for the other were absent.... By and large, these biblical prohibitions were directed at protecting male gender identity in a world in which male superiority over women was sacrosanct; thus they are ill-suited to guide moral or political action in the present day. (225)

If the Levitical prohibitions and other biblical texts were, in the first instance, aimed against subversion of male hierarchy over women, then how would a caring, egalitarian man-male sexual relationship have made any positive difference? Considerations of caring and commitment would be beside the point (i.e., the caring doesn’t eradicate the problem of subverting male hierarchy) while considerations of egalitarianism would be downright dangerous (i.e., male superiority over women must be maintained as “sacrosanct”). Why doesn’t Johnson notice this rather obvious inconsistency of argumentation? Perhaps it is because Johnson is not so much invested in making a consistent argument as in finding some reason, any reason, to invalidate the scriptural witness against homosexual practice.

We pointed out some problems above for a misogyny argument in the OT context. Even more problems arise in a NT context. Briefly: (1) Even among Greco-Roman moralists arguments based on structural compatibility were used and not only arguments predicated on male dominance. (2) In the Greco-Roman milieu opposition to male homosexual practice intensified, not lessened, as appreciation for women’s capacity for

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The only references in priestly material to “male and female” all refer to sexual pairing with an implicit acknowledgement of anatomical complementarity (Gen 1:27; 5:2; 6:19; 7:9, 16).

<sup>18</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 45-47.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the verdict of the homosexualist scholar of early Judaism, Daniel Boyarin. In biblical culture “penetration of a male constituted a consignment of him to the class of females, but, rather than a degradation of status [as in Greco-Roman culture], this constituted a sort of mixing of kinds.... The issue does not seem to have been status so much as an insistence on the absolute inviolability of gender dimorphism” (“Are There Any Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality?’” *JHSex* 5 [1995]: 341-43).



moral and intellectual discernment grew. (3) Since opposition to homosexual practice was more intense in early Judaism and early Christianity than anywhere else in the Greco-Roman world, and since too the misogyny theory presupposes that the prime motivation for such opposition was a desire to protect the sanctity of male superiority over women, the misogyny theory requires the absurd corollary that the NT writers and even Jesus were among the biggest misogynists of the Greco-Roman world. This corollary flies in the face of significant evidence that women in the first-century church were being given more significant roles than were generally accorded them in non-Christian society.

The fact that we don't find in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity the kind of accommodation to male homosexual practice within a broader misogynistic bent that we find generally everywhere else in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world—specifically the right of men to penetrate socially inferior males such as youths, foreigners, and slaves—indicates that for the subcultures of ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity gender differentiation was a far greater concern than gender stratification. The misogyny argument is, at best, highly reductionistic.

### **III. Johnson on the Witness of Jesus to Sexuality**

I have already touched on two facets of the witness of Jesus in my *Scottish Journal of Theology* article. First, I noted that Jesus used the twoness of the sexes ordained by God at creation (Gen 1:27; 2:24) to argue for a limitation on the number of persons in a sexual union to two, whether serially or concurrently. Since Jesus' stance on divorce/remarriage is predicated on the foundation of two sexes in a sexual bond, moderate accommodation to the former does not justify radical eradication of the latter. Second, I noted that Jesus' saying about "eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven" presupposed both that born-eunuchs and made-eunuchs were sexually abstinent (Matt 19:11-12) and that, like the saying about no marriage in heaven (Mark 12:25), doing away with a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations would spell the end of all sexual relations, not an option to engage in homosexual relations. Here I address four other issues raised by Johnson.

#### **1. Why Jesus' encounter with the centurion provides absolutely no support for a homosexualist ideology.**

Johnson claims that the story of Jesus' encounter with a centurion in Matt 8:5-13 is another example of how "Jesus pushes the envelope regarding sexual mores." According to Johnson, the centurion's "boy" "may have been ... a sex slave." Johnson reasons that the absence of any rebuke on Jesus' part shows Jesus' lack of concern for sexual conventions (141). Johnson seems not to realize that, if indeed the centurion were having sex with his male slave and if Jesus' silence was an indication of approval, then Jesus would be approving of same-sex rape and possibly forced castration (cf. Seneca the Elder, *Controversies* 4.Preface.10; Seneca the Younger, *Moral Epistles* 47.7). Such illogical speculations on Johnson's part underscores the desperate nature of his attempt to find something—anything—that might justify a radical departure from Scripture. As it is,

there are many arguments that speak against the “possibility” that Jesus encountered a centurion whom Jesus knew to be having a sexual relationship with his “boy.”<sup>20</sup>

## ***2. Why the penultimate significance that Jesus gave to sexual intimacy and to biological kinship ties buttresses, rather than subverts, a male-female prerequisite to marriage.***

According to Johnson, Jesus, “unlike some contemporary ‘family values’ teaching,” did not “make an idol out of marriage.” The fact that Jesus taught that “marriage and family are not ends in themselves but exist for the sake of something bigger” means that “being Jesus’ follower has little to do with ... conventional patterns of family ties,” which in turn allegedly permits the church to embrace homosexual unions (138). This gets matters backwards. Jesus could make demands regarding sexual purity that appear harsh to us precisely because Jesus gave only penultimate value to the “right” of sexual intimacy and marriage. If there is no sexual intercourse among humans in heaven it is not necessary to accommodate innate sexual urges in this age when these urges violate formal or structural requirements for sexual relations.

Johnson argues that, because Jesus appears to supplant biological kinship ties in favor of a new family of God predicated on doing God’s will, “being Jesus’ follower has little to do with ... follow[ing] conventional patterns of family ties” or with maintaining “the conventions of the biological family” (138). When it comes to homosexual relationships Johnson is willing to argue that, since “male and female” “no longer defines the identity of people who are in Christ” or constitutes “ultimate reality” in the Christian life (152), “ethical distinctions” based on male-female differentiation are no longer possible within sexual relationships. Yet Johnson shows an unwillingness to apply the same logic to incestuous relationships. If kinship, like gender, has lost its redemptive significance in Christ, then doesn’t it stand to reason that “ethical distinctions” based on the proximity of blood relatedness are no longer possible within sexual relationships? Johnson fails to see the perils of making the leap from statements that have to do with social relationships, even intimate social relationships, to conclusions that involve sexual relationships.

## ***3. Why “love of neighbor” does not invalidate formal prerequisites for sexual unions.***

Johnson similarly argues that Jesus would not have condemned loving and committed homosexual relationships inasmuch as Jesus admonished his followers “to bring the law to completion in their own lives by loving their neighbors (Matt. 5:43-45)” (143). Following this line of reasoning, Jesus would have praised a faithful polyamorous bond since Jesus made a point of redefining “neighbor” to include everyone with whom one might come into contact, including one’s enemy. The counter-argument that a person can truly love only one other person at the same time will not do on Johnson’s premise since Jesus throws off any limitations to the meaning of “love of neighbor” and Johnson applies the love commandment to homosexual relationships without any regard for the continuing legitimacy of structural prerequisites. The only way to avoid such absurdities is to do something that Johnson never does in his book; namely, to acknowledge that the

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<sup>20</sup> See “Notes to Gagnon’s Essay in the Gagnon-Via *Two Views* Book,” 15-16 n. 59; more recently, “Did Jesus Approve of a Homosexual Couple in the Story of the Centurion at Capernaum?” (2007; 8 pgs.; online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homosexCenturionStory.pdf>); and “Box Turtle Kincaid Peddles Distorted Orthodoxy Test While Promoting Immorality: Part 2: Jesus’ Distance Healing of an Official’s ‘Boy’” (2008; 19 pgs.; <http://robagnon.net/articles/homosexBoxTurtleKincaid3.pdf>).

love commandment is an *insufficient* (even if necessary) basis for legitimizing *sexual* bonds.<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. Why “we really do believe” that Jesus of Nazareth opposed homosexual practice absolutely.**

In one of his many shaming statements, Johnson asks readers: “*Do we really believe that Jesus would condemn gay couples who are sincerely seeking to live a life committed to one another?*” (143, my emphasis). If we reword the question a bit more faithfully we can see how historically absurd Johnson’s question is:

Is it historically likely that Jesus, a Jewish Messiah sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, operating in a first-century Palestinian context that abhorred homosexual practice and himself tightening sexual ethics based on the male-female prerequisite in Gen 1:27 and 2:24, would have given his blessing to *any* sexual union between two of his male disciples, including one of a committed sort?

The answer can only be: Obviously not. Would Jesus not rather have warned them of the coming judgment if they did not repent and urged them to “no longer be sinning”? Jesus’ view on homosexual practice, committed or otherwise, is not that difficult to figure out from an historical standpoint. In addition to arguments already brought forward are the following ten points:

1. Jesus’ retention of the Law of Moses even on relatively minor matters such as tithing, to say nothing of a foundational law in sexual ethics; and his view of the Old Testament as inviolable Scripture, which Scripture was absolutely opposed to man-male intercourse.
2. Jesus’ further intensification of the Law’s sex-ethic in matters involving adultery of the heart and divorce (Matt 5:27-32), suggesting a closing of remaining loopholes in the Law’s sex-ethic rather than a loosening; also his saying about cutting off body parts, warning that people could be thrown into hell precisely for not repenting of violations of God’s sexual standards (Matt 5:29-30).
3. The fact that the man who baptized Jesus, John the Baptist, was beheaded for defending Levitical sex laws in the case of the adult-incestuous union between Herod Antipas and the ex-wife of his half-brother Philip, a woman who was also the daughter of another half-brother.
4. Early Judaism’s univocal opposition to all homosexual practice.
5. The early church’s united opposition to all homosexual practice.
6. Jesus’ saying about the defiling effect of desires for various forms of sexual immoralities (Mark 7:21-23), which distinguished matters of relative moral indifference such as food laws from matters of moral significance such as the sexual commands of his Bible and connected Jesus to the general view of what constituted the worst forms of *porneia* in early Judaism (same-sex intercourse, incest, bestiality, adultery).
7. Jesus on the Decalogue prohibition of adultery, which in its Decalogue context and its subsequent interpretation in early Judaism as a rubric for the major sex laws of the Old Testament presupposed a male-female prerequisite for valid sexual bonds.
8. Jesus’ saying about Sodom (Matt 10:14-15 par. Luke 10:10-12), which, understood in the light of Second Temple interpretations of Sodom, included an indictment of Sodom for attempting to dishonor the integrity of the visitors’ masculinity by treating them as if they were the sexual counterparts to males.

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<sup>21</sup> Jesus must have had a distinctive sexual ethic that extended beyond the love commandment. For while Jesus expanded the meaning of “love your neighbor as yourself” to include everyone, he radically restricted their options for sexual partners to only one other person lifetime. Cf. my rebuttal of Walter Wink on this point: “Are There Universally Valid Sex Precepts?” 77-80.

9. Jesus' saying about not giving what is "holy" to the "dogs" (Matt 7:6), an apparent allusion to Deuteronomic law (Deut 23:17-18) and texts in 1-2 Kings that indict the *qedeshim*, self-designated "holy ones" identified as "dogs" for their attempt to erase their masculinity by serving as the passive-receptive partners in man-male intercourse.
10. The fact that Jesus developed a sex ethic that had distinctive features not shared by the love commandment (love for everyone does not translate into having sex with everyone); reached out to tax collectors and sexual sinners while simultaneously intensifying God's ethical demand in these areas; insisted that the adulterous woman stop sinning lest something worse happen to her (i.e., loss of eternal life; cf. John 8:11 with 5:14); appropriated the context of the "love your neighbor" command in Lev 19:18 by insisting on reproof as part of a full-orbed view of love (Luke 17:3-4; cf. Lev 19:17: reprove your neighbor lest you incur guilt for failing to warn him); and defined discipleship to him as taking up one's cross, denying oneself, and losing one's life (Mark 8:34-37; Matt 10:38-39; Luke 14:27; 17:33; John 12:25).

Thus there is every reason to believe that Jesus was at least as opposed to homosexual practice as anyone else in early Judaism or earliest Christianity and, given his stringent sexual ethic, probably more so.

#### IV. Johnson on 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10: "Men Who Lie with a Male"

Johnson simply asserts, without providing much in the way of supporting evidence, that *malakoi* (literally, "soft men") and *arsenokoitai* (literally, "men who lie with a male") in 1 Cor 6:9 refer to "male prostitutes" and the men who have sex with them, respectively; and that *arsenokoitai* in 1 Tim 1:10 (and also 1 Cor 6:9?) refers to men who have sex with their male slaves (131-33, 154). As with his work on Sodom and related texts and in spite of having written a "review" of my first book, Johnson informs readers of none of the counterarguments that I have put forward in extensive published work against such assumptions.<sup>22</sup> Once more, Johnson's first task, if he hasn't already done so, is to read more widely. His second task is to exercise the integrity of disclosing information to his readers that is inconvenient to his own position.

We have already demonstrated: (1) that the Levitical prohibitions from which *arsenokoitēs* was formed (LXX) were both framed absolutely by the legislators of the Holiness Code and interpreted as such in Second Temple Judaism and beyond (see II above); (2) that the Greco-Roman milieu already had a conception of caring homoerotic unions (see the *SJT* article); and (3) that Paul set Rom 1:26-27 and 1 Cor 6:9 against the backdrop of a male-female / man-woman prerequisite in Gen 1:27 and 2:24 respectively (ditto). We now add a few more points.

(4) Johnson surprisingly gives readers no indication from the literature that various ancient writers (e.g., pseudo-Aristotle, Philo, Soranus, Ptolemy, Vettius Valens) applied *malakoi* and related terms (cf. also Latin *molles*) chiefly to effeminate adult males who

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<sup>22</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 303-36; *Homosexuality and the Bible*, 81-88, with online notes 96-111 (pp. 23-26) in "Notes to Gagnon's Essay in the Gagnon-Via *Two Views* Book" (2003; 50 pgs.; <http://www.robagnon.net/2Views/HomoViaRespNotesRev.pdf>); "A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, Part 2," *HBT* 25 (2003): 179-275 (also online: <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoBalchHBTReview2.pdf>), 226-39 (critique of David Fredrickson's interpretation of 1 Cor 6:9); "Why the Disagreement," 72-73; "Does Jack Rogers's Book 'Explode the Myths' about the Bible and Homosexuality and 'Heal the Church'? Installment 3" (2006; 16 pgs.; online: <http://robagnon.net/articles/RogersBookReviewed3.pdf>), 9-14.

are biologically and/or psychologically disposed to desire penetration by men; moreover, that these writers centered their critique on the latter's attempted erasure of the masculine stamp given them by God/nature, not on exploitation of others, age difference, or acts of prostitution.<sup>23</sup>

(5) Johnson takes no account of my discussion of the use of *arsenokoitai*- words in Jewish and Christian texts after Paul, which provides no basis for limiting the reference to sex between men and male prostitutes.<sup>24</sup>

(6) Johnson borrows from Robin Scroggs's argument that in 1 Tim 1:10 the entire meaning of *arsenokoitai* is subsumed under the next group of offenders *andrapodistai* (slave traders, kidnappers, men-stealers). Yet Johnson neglects to acknowledge my counterpoint. The last half of the vice list in 1 Tim 1:9-10, at least, corresponds to the order of the Decalogue's fifth to ninth commandments. The mention of *pornoi* (sexually immoral people) in 1 Tim 1:10 clearly aligns with the seventh commandment against adultery, while the reference to *andrapodistai* clearly aligns with the eighth commandment against stealing. The only question is whether *arsenokoitai* belongs more with the latter (as Johnson thinks) than the former. The question is not hard to resolve once one realizes that several early Jewish and Christian discussions make a distinction between men who have sex with males, placed under the rubric of the seventh commandment against adultery, and "men-stealers," classified under the eighth commandment against stealing.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, is Johnson arguing that Paul included male slaves who were coerced into effacing their masculinity by lascivious masters among the *malakoi* that are condemned in 1 Cor 6:9 and with whom, presumably, at least some of the *arsenokoitai* are having sex? If the issue is exploitation, why would Paul be asserting that such coerced figures run the risk of exclusion from God's kingdom?

Even Dan O. Via and Walter Wink, two NT scholars strongly supportive of homosexual unions, have acknowledged that *arsenokoitai* would have included for Paul men who initiated a caring and committed homosexual relationship.<sup>26</sup> The idea that Paul would have told two men in a committed sexual relationship that the term did not include them is historically preposterous.

(7) There is no cognizance on Johnson's part of the pivotal role that Plato's *Laws* 636B-D (cf. 836B-842A) plays for all subsequent discussion of why man-male intercourse is "contrary to nature," including discussions in early Judaism. Here the Athenian criticizes intercourse between males (and between females) as "contrary to nature" (*para phusin*), not for any alleged promiscuity or coercion but rather for behavior

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<sup>23</sup> "Notes to Gagnon's Essay in the Gagnon-Via *Two Views* Book," 23-24 nn. 96-97; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 308-12. Cf. Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 110-20. Winter argues that *malakoi* refers broadly to any man who allows himself to be penetrated by another man. He also cites a reference in Plutarch (*Moralia* 139B) to men who are unable to consummate their marriage to a woman "through softness/effeminacy" (i.e., their passive homosexual inclination). He makes a point about *arsenokoitai* that could just as well be made about *malakoi*: "It was not a reference to a male prostitute. If Paul had been seeking a specific term proscribing that profession, the LXX's choice of ὁ πορνεύων [*ho porneuōn*] in Deuteronomy 23:17 would have provided him with an appropriate one" (p. 119).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-24.

<sup>25</sup> So Philo, *Pseudo-Phocylides*, the rabbis, and the *Didache*; *ibid.*, 335-36. Cf. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 332-36; *Homosexuality and the Bible*, 87-88.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, 11, 13; Walter Wink, "To Hell with Gays?" *Christian Century* 119.13 (June 5-12): 33.

that makes a male into a female, can never result in procreation, and is not found in animals.<sup>27</sup> The first argument has primacy, at least in subsequent Jewish appropriation. Critiquing any of these individual arguments would miss the point. As with a modern-day difficulties in explaining why adult committed incest is wrong, these stated arguments get around, without actually hitting directly, the main problem with the behavior; namely, that there is something fundamentally asymmetrical about one attempting to merge sexually with what one already is as a sexual being. A remark in pseudo-Lucian's *Affairs of the Heart* comes closest to stating this point explicitly: "One nature came together in one bed. But *seeing themselves in one another* they were ashamed neither of what they were doing nor of what they were having done to them" (19-20; my emphasis).

## V. Johnson on Romans 1:24-27: "Use" of a Same Sex Person "Contrary to Nature"

Despite claiming to "have treated Romans [1:24-27] in detail throughout" the first chapters of his book (135), Johnson actually does surprisingly little with this important text and shows surprisingly little knowledge of the obvious (and already published) counterarguments to his own arguments.

### 1. Why Johnson's claim that Paul in Rom 1:24-27 condemned only those forms of sexual behavior that were hedonistic and coercive won't work.

Johnson claims that Paul's remarks in Rom 1:24-27 could not have anything to do with committed homoerotic unions because Paul supposedly elsewhere condemns only sexual relationships that are hedonistic or exploitative, involving sexual promiscuity, prostitution, unfaithfulness, or coercion. A "covenantal" homosexual relationship cannot possibly be what Paul had in mind when he referred to sexual "impurity" (*akatharsia*), "immorality" (*porneia*), "licentiousness" (*aselgeia*), "lust" (*epithumia*), and "debauchery" (*koitai*, literally "lyings" or "beds"), Johnson alleges.<sup>28</sup>

The reader will not find in Johnson's book any mention of Paul's handling of the case of a sexual relationship between a man and his stepmother in 1 Cor 5.<sup>29</sup> Why? I suggest that the omission is due to the fact that this type of immoral relationship, like a homoerotic union, has the potential of being conducted by consenting adults in a non-promiscuous and non-coercive manner and yet is still justly subject to Paul's condemnation. Indeed, since (as we have seen) Johnson parades the relationship of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi as a paradigm for a "one bone, one flesh, one family" same-sex sexual bond deserving of the blessing of the people of God (145-47), one might wonder whether Johnson would like to hold up the incestuous relationship in 1 Cor 5 as another such paradigm—of course, presuming the mutual commitment of the parties involved.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Plato also compares homosexual practice to sexual desire for one's brother or sister, son or daughter (838A).

<sup>28</sup> So 131, 133-36, 154; citing 1 Thess 4:3-6; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9; Rom 13:13-14.

<sup>29</sup> Paul calls the man a  *pornos*, a sexually immoral person, in 5:9-11; 6:9.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson charges: "The anti-gay argument really boils down to this: 'You need a covenantal context, but we aren't going to give you one'" (131). This is a blatant distortion. Commitment and fidelity would no more justify an adult-consensual homosexual union than they would justify an adult-consensual incestuous or polyamorous union. A covenantal context does not turn a structural incongruous relationship into an

Johnson also ignores the obvious fact that nothing in the wording of Rom 1:24-27 indicates any limitation on the indictment of male and female homoerotic practice. The wording of “exchanging” and “leaving behind” the other sex *for the same sex* is absolute. The text does not say or even infer that men and women exchanged or left behind committed relationships with either sex for *exploitative* relationships with either sex. As we have seen, committed homosexual relationships were widely known in antiquity; moreover, some Greco-Roman moralists condemned even these. Paul himself stresses the mutuality of the homoerotic desires by mentioning that males were “inflamed<sup>31</sup> with their yearning for one another” and that “their bodies [were] dishonored among them(selves)” —dishonored not by mutual promiscuity or coercion but rather by the compromise of their gendered existences in attempting to merge with “one another” as though with their sexual complement. The injury done is an injury to sexual identity. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (d. 135 C.E.) framed the matter more in active/passive terms than did Paul in Rom 1:24-27 but his views are nonetheless helpful for doing away with Johnson’s exploitation-hedonism argument: “What does the one who undergoes (*ho paschōn*) the things of the anal-receptive male (*ho kinaidos*)<sup>32</sup> lose? His manhood. And the one who performs the act? In addition to many other things, he too (loses) his manhood, no less” than the passive partner (*Discourses* 2.10.17).

To these arguments many others can be added. Early Judaism was certainly unanimous in its absolute opposition to all homosexual practice.<sup>33</sup> I noted in the *SJT* article, in the discussion of Brooten’s work, that the referent in 1:26 is clearly to female-female intercourse, which in turn demolishes any argument that Paul was thinking only of hedonistic or exploitative forms of homosexual practice. I also showed in the same article that Paul clearly echoed Gen 1:27 in Rom 1:26-27, indicating that Paul rejected male-male and female-female intercourse not in the first instance because of any exploitation or hedonism but rather because of it violated a male-female prerequisite ordained by God at creation. Finally, as we indicated at the end of our discussion of 1 Cor 6:9 (above), the absolute nature argument against homosexual practice, used in Plato’s *Laws* and subsequent reflection, has little to do with distinctions based on hedonism and coercion. Philo’s comment in *Contemplative Life* 59 clearly distinguishes the unnatural error of

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acceptable relationship. Homosexual practice is not immoral because it falls outside a covenantal context; rather, it falls outside the covenantal context because it is immoral.

<sup>31</sup> The language about being “inflamed” does not specify promiscuity. Paul makes no point here about multiple sexual partners. His attention is entirely focused on abandoning intercourse with one’s true sexual complement, the other sex, for intercourse with the same sex. Philo’s comment in *Contemplative Life* 59, cited two paragraphs below makes the same point. Paul, like many in antiquity, viewed any infraction of God-ordained boundaries as an overheating of desire simply because transgression of God’s will invariably entailed a victory of the passions of the flesh over the rational mind or Spirit (cf. Rom 7:13-25). If one craved anything that God had forbidden or nature had shown to be unacceptable, and succumbed to that craving, then obviously one was mastered by one’s passion, thereby proving that the intensity of the passion had been too great to be resisted. The sequence of thought for Paul was not: Same-sex intercourse is excess passion; therefore it is wrong. It was: Same-sex intercourse is wrong; therefore it is excess passion. The concept of “disoriented desire” logically precedes the concept of “inordinate desire.” See further *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 386-89; “Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, Part 2,” 218-20.

<sup>32</sup> The term *kinaidos* literally means “butt-shaker” but here and often simply the passive partner who desires anal intercourse.

<sup>33</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159-83.

homosexual practice even from heterosexual promiscuity and exploitation: “Nearly the whole of Plato’s *Symposium* is about love, not merely about men mad after [i.e. madly in love with] men—for these desires pay tribute to the laws of nature—but about men (mad) after males, differing from them only in age” (*Contemplative Life* 59; my emphasis).

## **2. Johnson’s various failed attempts at dismissing Paul’s nature argument.**

The “contrary to nature” argument used by Paul also cuts through any distinctions based on hedonism and exploitation. Johnson tries a number of different ways to discount Paul’s appeal to nature, none of them well thought out.

(a) **Nature argument as anti-Hebraic?** Johnson argues: “There is no word for ‘nature’ in Hebrew, which means that Paul is not drawing directly on the Old Testament as his background source” (82). Yet the *concept* of natural theology is not foreign to the Old Testament.<sup>34</sup> Genesis 2:21-24 certainly images woman as man’s sexual “counterpart” or “complement,” with its trifold emphasis on woman being *taken from* one of ‘*ādām*’s sides/ribs and with its implicit image of marriage as the rejoining of man and woman. Likewise the priestly notion of “kinds” both in Gen 1 and in Lev 19, along with the prohibitions of improper sexual “mixing” in Lev 18 and 20, indicate a concern with congruence in natural structures.

(b) **“Nature” as only the conventional?** Johnson contends (through the celebrationist persona) that Paul’s “thinking reflects the view that something is unnatural if it is unconventional” (82). Actually, a careful study of Paul’s use of the term reveals otherwise. “Nature” in Paul corresponds to the essential material, inherent, biological, or organic constitution of things as created and set in motion by God (Gal 2:15; 4:8; Rom 2:14; 2:27; 11:21, 24). This includes even the reference to nature in 1 Cor 11:14-15 where the hair argument is similar to the Stoic argument for beards for men, based on natural endowment. Specifically, nature gives an indication that scalp hair is more indispensable for women than for men by making major hair loss there much rarer for women.<sup>35</sup> Obviously, the conclusion drawn from an observation of nature is more convincing in some cases than others, which is probably why the nature argument is only one of multiple arguments used in 1 Cor 11:2-16, whereas it is *the* argument, along with the echo to Gen 1:27, that Paul uses to reject homosexual practice in Rom 1:26-27. That Paul means in Rom 1:26-27 the embodied complementarity of maleness and femaleness still transparent in nature from original creation structures is apparent from Paul’s parallel observation in Rom 1:19-20 about the attributes of God being “transparent ... from the creation of the world, ... being mentally apprehended by means of the things made.”<sup>36</sup> We have already noted that nature arguments used in the Greco-Roman world included an awareness of complementary male-female structures (sec. II.6.1 above).

(c) **Nature argument as misogyny?** Johnson, in the “liberationist” persona, claims that the expression “natural use” in Rom 1:26-27 indicates that “sex is something that men are supposed to do, not so much *with* women as *to* them” (90). However, as I have noted elsewhere, (1) the word *chrēsis* (“use”) can be employed in sexual contexts that speak of the enjoyment of both partners; (2) the context for the use of the term in Rom 1:27 is

<sup>34</sup> Cf. James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

<sup>35</sup> *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 365-78.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-58.



clearly that of mutual desire; and (3) Paul also employs the term for a woman's natural "use" of a man in Rom 1:26, suggesting as he does elsewhere that sexual pleasure is a two-way street in marriage (cf. 1 Cor 7:3).<sup>37</sup>

(d) ***A valid link to Rom 11:24?*** Citing Eugene Rogers, Johnson compares Paul's description of homosexual practice as "contrary to nature" in Rom 1:26 with the description of God's grafting of Gentiles as an act "contrary to nature" later in Rom 11:24. For Johnson the connection means that "God defies our ordinary religious categories" and "acts contrary to what seems natural," welcoming "gentile people whom Jews considered ritually and morally—indeed sexually—unclean" (99-100). Clearly, however, Paul would have rejected vehemently any attempt to link these two uses of *para phusin* in Rom 1:26 and 11:24 as a means of justifying homosexual behavior among converts. Paul accepted ethnicity as a benign condition but, as with Luke's description of the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20, 29), adamantly rejected any link between ethnicity or circumcision/diet on the one hand and sexual intercourse on the other as matters of indifference (cf. 1 Cor 6:12-20; Rom 13:13 with 14:1-23).

Where Johnson gets confused—no doubt because he is not a Greek scholar—is over the preposition *para* with an accusative object. Its meaning can vary from the basic neutral sense of "beyond," as in its use in a horticultural metaphor in Rom 11:24, to the specific negative sense of "in transgression or violation of," "contrary to," and "against," as in its use in ethical matters in Rom 1:26.<sup>38</sup> Context is decisive. There can be no doubt that Paul used *para phusin* in Rom 1:26 in the second, morally negative sense since the specific context refers to same-sex intercourse as "sexual impurity," "dishonoring their bodies," "dishonorable passions," and "indecent" or "shamelessness" (1:24, 26-27)—all in a broader context referring to "impiety," "unrighteousness," "sin," and practices "deserving death" (1:18-32; 3:9-20, 23).<sup>39</sup> Johnson's attempt to link Rom 11:24 to 1:26 is ironic in view of the fact that only two pages later he complains that the "non-affirming" side engages in "a selective quoting of Scripture" (101). If Johnson wants to extol the acceptance of unnatural sexual practices as God's work, I see no reason why he should stint himself by withholding approval of committed adult incest or even the most unnatural sexual practice of all, bestiality.<sup>40</sup>

### ***3. The error in Johnson's claim that Rom 1:24-27 provides no clear rule, certainly not for "gay Christians," and does not describe homosexual practice as a God-provoking act.***

Citing Richard Hays, Johnson insists that Rom 1:24-27 does not "articulate a clear 'rule' about how to handle homoerotic conduct" (64). Yet this makes about as much sense as saying that one can't derive a clear rule against idolatry (1:19-23, 25) or murder (1:29) from the extended vice list in Rom 1:18-32. Clearly (and as oft noted in my writings), Paul in 6:19-21 returns in part to his discussion of homosexual practice in 1:24-27 when he exhorts the believers at Rome not to put their bodily members any longer at

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<sup>37</sup> "Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture*, Part 2," 213-15.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. LSJ, *s.v. para* C.III.4; and BDAG, *s.v. para* B.6.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. similar uses in Greco-Roman critiques of homosexual practice from Plato to pseudo-Lucian and in such Jewish writers as Philo and Josephus.

<sup>40</sup> Even Johnson has to add that God's acceptance of Gentiles "does not, of course, mean they are entitled to continue their sexual hedonism" (100). Nor, I would add, does it mean that we should disregard altogether formal or structural prerequisites given in our bodies for congruous sexual unions.

the disposal of *akatharsia*, “uncleanness” or “impurity,” a word used elsewhere in Romans only in 1:24 to describe, first and foremost, homosexual practice. This and other forms of lawlessness Paul describes as “things of which we are now ashamed,” another intratextual echo back to Rom 1:24-27, here to the shame language of homosexual practice as a “dishonoring” of the gendered self and as an “indecent” or “disgrace.”<sup>41</sup>

Paul’s remarks in 6:19-21 also show the error of Johnson’s argument that “Paul does not provide a specific word for contemporary gays and lesbians who *do* know God” (135). Certainly none of the other vices enumerated in 1:29-31 require prior worship of statues, even though here too Paul treats such vices as the consequence of worshipping idols and God’s handing over (1:28). Paul repeatedly warns believers in his letters, people who do know God, not to return to their former pagan sexual practices lest they be excluded from God’s kingdom.<sup>42</sup>

Also misguided is Johnson’s contention that “it is a misreading of [Rom 1:24-27] to see homoerotic conduct as something that particularly provokes God’s wrath” (64-65). Johnson fails to see (though I have made the point elsewhere)<sup>43</sup> that the vices in 1:24-31 are both the *product* of God’s initial wrath, in the sense that God steps back and allows those who want to run their own lives to be ruled by preexisting sinful desires (1:24-31), and the *provocation* for God’s ultimate wrath, in the sense that the continual heaping of up sins leads to cataclysmic destruction on the Day of Judgment (1:32-2:5). Same-sex intercourse is highlighted immediately after idolatry precisely for the reason that Paul viewed it as a particularly egregious example, on the horizontal plane of inter-human behavior, of humans suppressing the truth about themselves, accessible through observation of the material structures of creation that are still intact in nature.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Our discussion of Johnson’s treatment of the story of Sodom and related texts, the Levitical prohibitions, the witness of Jesus, and the witness of Paul in 1 Cor 6:9 and Rom 1:24-27 shows that Johnson either doesn’t want to know the secondary literature well or he sometimes knows it but does not want his readers to be aware of the counterarguments. He shows very little first-hand ability to work with primary sources. Logical missteps abound. Only his work on the Levitical prohibitions can be rated even marginal in terms of research (though still full of logical missteps and occasional misrepresentations). The rest of his work on Sodom and related texts, Jesus, and Paul on 1 Cor 6:9 and Rom 1:24-27 is so badly done at every level that it is a wonder anyone would publish it.

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<sup>41</sup> A similar connection can be made with Rom 13:13, which forbids Christians from engaging in *koitai*, “immoral sexual activities” or, more literally, “lyings” or “beds,” a term that obviously links up with *arsenokoitai*, “men lying with a male,” in 1 Cor 6:9 as a particular instance of an immoral “lying.”

<sup>42</sup> 1 Thess 4:2-7; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19-21; cf. Col 3:5-10; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6; 1 Tim 1:9-10. Aside from “idolaters,” none of the offender groups cited in the vice list in 1 Cor 6:9-10, including “men who lie with a male,” presupposes prior worship of statues. Cf. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 284-89 (“Did Paul Think Only Idol Worshipers Could Engage in Same-Sex Intercourse?”).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-51, incl. 250 n. 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 246-53, 277-84; “Rowan Williams’ Wrong Reading of Romans (... and John 14:6)” (Apr. 2007, 11 pgs.; online: <http://robagnon.net/articles/homosexRowanWilliamsResp.pdf>; abridged in *The Church of England Newspaper*, May 4, 2007, pp. 22-23, under the title “Is Rowan Williams Wrong on the Meaning of Romans?”).

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