

Dunning, Benjamin H. “Same-Sex Relations “ (2019) in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*. Oxford: Oxford University. 573-591.

Benjamin Dunning wisely concludes his chapter in the Oxford Handbook affirming that the “slippery characteristics” of sex call for “scholars further probing into the complexities of same-sex relations and the New Testament” (588). Amongst new orientations toward the relevant history of the study of Romans 1 he cites:

- Marchal, who “highlights the need to rethink our relations of identification and disidentification with the many historical complexities of the passage, rather than subsuming the latter under the apostle’s single authoritative voice (2011a)”;
- Menéndez-Antuña, who “focuses on desire in the present, arguing that its manifold meanings...might enable new relations...both to what is knowable and also to what is ambiguous or underdetermined in the Pauline past (2015); :
- “Finally, I have argued for *refusing to treat Romans 1 as any sort of proof-text on sexual issues*” (587; italics mine).

Harper “chooses to emphasize the novelty of what was...a radically singular invention on Paul’s part :..Paul’s originality lay in the...overriding sense of gender—rather than age or status—as the prime determinant in the propriety of a sexual act....By reducing the sex act down to the most basic constituents of male and female, Paul was able to redescribe the sexual culture surrounding him in transformative terms....[T]he analogy between male and female same-sex attraction was strikingly novel and truly momentous (2013:95; cf. 12)...What is new here for Harper...is the Pauline analogy between male-male and female-female eroticism, an equivalence that would eventually foster “unprecedented attention to love for women” (95)...Brooten notes that ‘early Christian theology....By considering homoerotic women and men together, early Christians may have played a crucial role in the development of the concept of homosexuality’ (1996:193). Thus, we would seem to have a version of what Harper pinpoints as the utterly new and completely decisive Pauline invention: the treatment of female same-sex erotic relations and male same-sex erotic relations as analogical counterparts

“Yet on the whole, Harper’s is a highly selective and idiosyncratic reading of Brooten. To begin with, the point just cited from Brooten is not about Paul specifically but about the overall development of early Christian theology in general....With respect to Paul specifically Brooten argues, ‘Female-female and male-male sexual relations in the Roman world and in Rom 1:26 are both parallel *and non-parallel to one another*....(266, emphasis added) By contrast, Harper’s streamlined conclusion....On his reading the apostle’s singular and momentous innovation is the parallel between female and male modes of same-sex eros. The care with which Brooten notes the uneasy operation of that parallel *within* an ancient Roman ideological framework...disappears from view” (282)....

“The appeal to Judaism is a crucial aspect of Harper’s argument in the passage....’Paul’s overriding sense of gender—rather than age or status—as the primary determinant in the propriety of a sexual act was nurtured by contemporary Jewish attitudes (95; cf.12)...As is well known, Philo is consistently scathing in his denunciation of same-sex erotic acts....Yet...while Philo’s polemics are variegated and wide-ranging, the terms in which he argues are generally precatory on the cultural logic of Hellenistic pederasty [see Scroggs 1983]....like his pagan contemporaries, Philo does not seem to think that there is anything particularly odd about the object choice of the active partners...Philo tacitly acknowledges that the beauty of boys attracts male sexual desire (1998:95)...the fundamental exegetical point underwriting Harper’s account here seems exactly right: Romans 1:26-27 does not explicitly mention active and passive sexual roles....according to what sort of cultural and theological logic could Paul’s seemingly blanket condemnation cover the specifically active male partner in a same-sex sex act (or inversely, the passive female one)? (584). For Philo “same-sex acts spring from a single, undifferentiated notion of sexual desire taken to an excessive extreme. Martin references...what is condemned as unnatural as twofold: ‘the feminization of the penetrated man and the unfruitful expenditure of seed by the penetrator’ (2006:59; *Abr.* 133-36)...Martin reminds us, ‘Paul shows no concern for procreation whatsoever’ (59; similarly Jesus, despite Gen 1:28 command, which fundamentalists cite against homosexuals).

It will be interesting to see whether Dunning’s erudition and that of other Oxford Handbook articles have any effect on the kind of religious writings that specialize in condemning sexual diversity and resist any “further probing.”