

**Hultgren, Arland J. (2011). *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Reviewed by Tom Hanks, Other Sheep, Buenos Aires.**

Some books are worth two taxi fares and a 2-hour wait in Argentine customs and this proved to be one of them! In this most recent of major commentaries on Romans (804 pp.) the author recognizes that in Romans 1:26-27 Paul does not condemn all homoerotic acts or relations, but only those that are “abusive” (2011:99, 102, 616-17; see the attempted gang rape of visiting angels to Sodom in Genesis 19:1-11). In this regard he differs significantly from Robert Jewett’s recent work (which rather uncritically followed Robert Gagnon’s highly prejudiced treatment). Otherwise, Hultgren who is Professor of New Testament at Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul Minnesota and author of several highly respected works, represents a more traditional reading of Romans (interacting with, but not accepting some of the most radical conclusions of the “New Perspectives on Paul”).

Although published by Eerdmans (conservative and evangelical), Hultgren’s commentary, has an unqualified recommendation from Donald A. Hagner of Fuller Theological Seminary (an evangelical institution with a longstanding anti-gay policy): “Hultgren’s wonderful treatment combines the highest level of scholarship in a nontechnical presentation, with a down-to-earth and insightful application”! And lest we dismiss the work as simply popular devotional propaganda, Robert Kysar adds: “In this veritable encyclopedia Hultgren masterfully employs a wide range of the best scholarship in the service of the church....A treasure for both scholars and preachers” (both comments on the back cover)

Hultgren treats Rom 1:26-27 exegetically (pp. 95-103) with a more hermeneutical “Appendix 2” (“Romans 1:26-27 and Homosexuality,” including a respectable 2 pp. bibliography; 2011: 616-622). His conclusion, briefly stated is: “That larger context of this section...favors the view that even in those verses reference is being made to destructive and/or abusive behavior” (617). As he points out: “Throughout 1:19b-27 the indicative verbs in Greek are in the aorist (simple past) tense. The effect is that Paul carries on his discourse as though he is talking about something that happened at some point in the past (*in illo tempore*, ‘in that time’ of mythical origins) that explains the present” (617). He concludes: “As soon as the concept of sexual orientation is brought into the discussion and the words ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ exist and can be used, the judgments made concerning persons must be changed significantly. There can be no virtue in perpetuating an error in judgment, even if it is traditional and is, according to a traditional reading, thought to be expressed in Scripture itself. Although the Bible knows about same-gender relationships, it knows nothing of sexual orientation, and therefore it knows nothing of ‘homosexuality’ or ‘homosexuality’ as descriptors of conditions or behaviors” (620).

Hultgren even goes a bit out of his way to comment similarly on another traditional “clobber text” (1 Cor 6:9) and in such a way as to deprive homophobic interpreters of any Biblical basis: “The degree to which 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 should be included within a discussion of Romans 1:26-27 is unclear....Perhaps the wisest course is to conclude that the precise meaning of the terms is inconclusive [he translates *arsenokoitai* literally as “male-bedders”] but that from the context it is clear that they are examples of persons who exploit others” (100-101).

Hultgren could have presented an even stronger case. He recognizes that “their women” (Rom 1:26) only practice some kind of behavior that is “against/beyond nature,” but not necessarily same-sex relations, and he even cites James E. Miller’s article (99, note 65), but prefers the same-sex interpretation (not initiated until ca. 400 A.D. by John Chrysostom). He correctly interprets Rom 14:14 and 20 as affirming not just “food” but all *things* clean (517) but fails to cite William Countryman or Daniel Helminiak and relate this to the sexual “uncleanness” of 1:24. Hultgren also recognizes that later in Romans Paul even refers to God as acting “against/beyond nature” (11:23-24) but fails to see the significance for the interpretation of Rom 1:26-27 (96). Hultgren envisions Paul as referring to abuse and exploitation in such practices as pederasty (following Robin Scroggs), or those of clients of male prostitutes and the prostitutes themselves (101; omitting Robert Jewett’s emphasis on slaves!). However, he points out that now “A new reality has come on the scene for the church, in which persons of the same gender claim to be Christians (not idolaters), know themselves to be homosexual (not heterosexual deviants), pledge themselves to lives of fidelity (rejecting promiscuity) and want their relationship public (not hidden away)” (619).