What types of same gender relationships were the ancients and biblical writers aware of?



When one looks at the biblical texts that refer to same gender sexual behaviour, it is important to try and understand exactly what acts took place at various stages of history and to ask whether the biblical writers were aware of the acts and types of relationships that we now know existed. Were those writers aware of people who we now refer to as lesbian, gay or bisexual? Why are the acts condemned? Did the biblical condemnations apply to people in loving relationships then and, if so, do they still apply to those types of relationships today? This article seeks to answer some of those questions.

Some of the best evidence that we have is reported by gay and lesbian progressive scholars. They include Bernadette Brooten, who uncovers much evidence of sexual love between women in her book “Love Between Women”. Such relationships are best described by the term “homoeroticism” since the term “homosexuality” was first used in 1868 and is not suitable for describing the relationships that existed in ancient times.

# The Ancient Near East and Israel

Very little evidence exists about the types of homoerotic contacts that existed in the Ancient Near East and Israel. However, progressive scholar Phyllis Bird reports that omens, myths and proverbs suggest that occasional homoerotic contacts were tolerated, on a consensual or contractual basis.[[1]](#endnote-1) Some references suggest that there may have been truly loving relationships.[[2]](#endnote-2)

# Cultic Activities

Some Mesopotamian texts refer to cultic activities amongst groups such as the *assinnu*, (c. 4500 BC to c. 609 BC) who worshipped the goddess Astarte/Inanna/Ishtar, but the precise activities of the cultic personalities and their very existence are disputed**.**

It has been suggested elsewhere that cultic personalities were involved in prostitution and that male worshipers engaged in anal intercourse with male priests and female priestesses of the fertility goddesses, possibly in a quest for fertility, but these scholars believe that it involved ritual sexual intercourse, including homoerotic coitus, which was both divinised (deities were involved in sexual activity) and sacralised (by the cultic personalities themselves). It has also been claimed that, in Canaan, the storm and fertility god Baal and his consort Astarte/Asherah were worshipped on high places, including with ritual sexual activity and possibly prostitution as well. This involved the “holy man” or *qades*, and “holy woman” or *qedesa*.Both these terms appear in Deut 23:17-18, together with the words for prostitute (*zona*) and male prostitute (*keleb*, “dog”). Here, the word ‘*to’evah’* (“abhorrent”) is used about the wages from both male and female temple prostitution. Various forms of this word appear 117 times in the Hebrew scriptures, including in Lev 18:22 and 20:13, which condemn intercourse between two males. Richard M. Davidson states that the cult functionaries mentioned in Deut 23:17 engaged in ritual sex, amongst other things, probably for hire (sacred prostitution). They were probably separate entities from the non-cultic prostitution of the *zona* or *keleb*. However, he feels thatthe close proximity of these terms confirms the sexual role of the *qedesa* and *qades*.The precise nature of the activity of the *qades* is never explicitly described. Some scholars feel that ritual sexual intercourse or prostitution on the high places was involved, but the text does not clearly refer to homoerotic prostitution. Some think the male prostitutes were more likely to be offering male-male intercourse, while Davidson states that this was “undoubtedly” the case. [[3]](#endnote-3)

However, other scholars feel that male same-gender prostitution in ancient Israel may have been less common than was once thought and the idea of cultic prostitution may well be a myth. Bird comments that Mesopotamian texts describe a number of classes of male cult personnel that have frequently been described as male prostitutes, but their role in male homoerotic encounters is disputed and evidence for sacred prostitution and homoeroticism is scanty and almost exclusively inferential. In fact, very few extant texts inform us of what homoerotic practices occurred in the times that Leviticus and Deuteronomy were written.[[4]](#endnote-4) Martti Nissinen suggests that cultic personalities were asexual rather than homoerotic. However, there is no way of knowing whether the *assinnu* or other cultic personalities were sexually orientated towards other men, and it is highly questionable whether the modern concept of “homosexuality” is applicable in this context.[[5]](#endnote-5)

David M. Halperin suggests evidence for temple prostitution in Athens and especially elsewhere in the Greek world, including Corinth, from well before the 5th Century BC to at least the 2nd Century CE. Other cultic activities certainly occurred from 204 BC in Rome, where the self-castrated Galli priests worshipped and served the Syrian goddess Atargatis and the Phrygian goddess Cybele . Their worship was incorporated into the state religious practices of the ancient Roman Empire and was described by Philo (a contemporary of Jesus and Paul), and Lucian (third century CE). The Galli indulged in feminization, male cultic activities, and sexual interactions between males. Like Paul, in Romans 1:26-27, and many others of that time, Philo’s view was that these acts were “contrary to nature” (*para physin)*.[[6]](#endnote-6)

S. M. Baugh has argued that there is no evidence of cult prostitution in Greek or Roman cities of the later, NT era, including the temple of Artemis in Ephesus or at the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth. However, he does state that: “Prostitutes were regularly regarded as devotees of Aphrodite in Greek literature…”[[7]](#endnote-7)

# The Greco-Roman World

Quite a lot is known about practices and attitudes in the Greco-Roman world between 400 BCE and 400CE, which includes the time of St Paul.

Ancient writers saw every sexual pairing as being between an active and a passive partner, regardless of gender, so the distinction was not biological. Passive, penetrated males, such as slaves (in Rome) and freeborn boys (in Greece), were regarded as feminine or effeminate, and active partners, whether male or female, were regarded as masculine. Passive males and active females were seen as transgressing gender roles and these ideas appear in much of the ancient literature. Philo and others reserved their greatest scorn for the effeminate, passive partner. Indeed, Philo labelled the effeminate male “*androgynos*” (literally male-female).

Many males would have sexual desire for, and engage in, sexual intercourse with both males and females, and especially with young boys and girls.

There were various forms of homoerotic relationship across the Greco-Roman world. There were four broad groups – exploitation, concubinage, lovers (especially pederasty in Greece) and formal unions.

There were male-male marriages and other formal same-sex unions in both Greece and Rome, and Brooten reports that there were also female-female marriages in parts of Egypt. However, we do not know about the precise nature of these marriages.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The most common form of same gender relationship in ancient Greece was pederasty, a relationship between a man and a boy. However, there were also voluntary sexual encounters or “one night stands”, slave prostitution in the ancient Roman Empire, and “Effeminate Call Boys”, possibly in both ancient Greece and Rome.

## Ancient Greece

In ancient Greece the commonest form of homoeroticism was same-gender, erotic-social relationships between a freeborn boy or youth and an adult, with predominantly education and wisdom, rather than sexual satisfaction, as the goal. This was true “pederasty”, the “love of boys”. Pederasty was very common in classical Greece, especially between teachers and pupils at the gymnasium. In upper class circles, meetings were also arranged at athletics venues and the *palaestra* (privatewrestling schools). Even the earliest texts suggest that some men had a “different nature” and therefore different sexual preferences.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The ancient Greeks considered the sexual desire of adult males for handsome youths to be natural and normal. So long as certain decencies were observed, these relationships were neither against custom nor the law, and they were regarded as decent, honourable and even sometimes praiseworthy.[[10]](#endnote-10) Kenneth Dover and Thomas K. Hubbard claim that the ideal in a pederastic relationship was frontal, intercrural intercourse (between the legs), rather than anal intercourse. However, this view is based partly on vase paintings and has been described as naiive.[[11]](#endnote-11) Moreover, in reality, ideals were often not observed.

In pederasty, one partner, almost always the older, was the active partner. The other, almost always the younger, was the passive partner.[[12]](#endnote-12) In Athens, it was associated with philosophy, music, arts, and physical exercise. Such relationships served a purpose for both partners that they could not find elsewhere.[[13]](#endnote-13) It may have started as early as 735 BCE, flourished during the classical age (6th to 4th centuries BCE) and may have continued as late as the beginning of the Common Era. Mark D. Smith states that, from the time of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), evidence for pederastic practices declines considerably, when pederasty was probably increasingly seen as morally problematic, though other homoerotic practices continued unabated. [[14]](#endnote-14)  Pederasty coincided with the development of slavery and financial transactions.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The ancient Greeks considered the sexual desire of adult males for handsome youths to be natural and normal. So long as certain decencies were observed, these relationships were neither against custom nor the law, and they were regarded as decent, honourable and even sometimes praiseworthy.[[16]](#endnote-16) Although they differed substantially from our modern understanding of “homosexuality”, pederastic relationships did involve a degree of erotic desire.[[17]](#endnote-17) While most ancient Greek men were probably bisexual in their behaviour, there is evidence that some men were attracted exclusively to someone of the same sex.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Halperin feels that the concept of intercourse in Pederasty was very different from that today. He feels that it was not an experience of mutual satisfaction of something one has with someone else, but rather an action performed by one person upon another. It was a deeply polarising experience between a person performing sexual activity in an act of domination upon a “sexual patient” expressing sexual passivity.[[19]](#endnote-19) Certainly, sexual satisfaction belonged principally to the active partner, although there is some evidence that at least some youths did derive sexual pleasure and satisfaction from the relationship.[[20]](#endnote-20) However, the youths in pederastic relationships were vulnerable to the sexual demands of adults, and were sometimes victims of sexual abuse, as seen in writings by Plato and Aristotle, for example. [[21]](#endnote-21) Concerns about the potential for harm to a boy from pederasty may have led to the concept of Platonic love but it is questionable whether it was ever a reality.[[22]](#endnote-22) Hubbard states that the power dynamics were not all in favour of the active partner. Youths could, and did, reject the advances of older men, leaving the lover emotionally helpless and desperate.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Greeks emphasised the ideal of beauty and the youthful, trained, male body, rather than a woman, represented the ideal of beauty for them. [[24]](#endnote-24)

These were homoerotic relationships in which the partners were not, at least in principle, homosexual in the modern sense of a sexual orientation.

It seems sexual relations were only between a man and those who were regarded as social or political minors (women, boys, foreigners, prostitutes and slaves of either gender). Relationships with slaves are rarely mentioned and, when they are, it is usually someone else’s slave. Technically, Athenian slaves enjoyed protection from laws against rape [[25]](#endnote-25)

Although it was understandable for people to fall in love with either of the sexes, public expression of male homoerotic feelings may have been tolerated more than expression of heterosexual feelings in public. [[26]](#endnote-26) Marriage did not necessarily mean that men would abandon their boy lovers[[27]](#endnote-27) and Nissinen views the norm as “institutionalised bisexual role behaviour”. [[28]](#endnote-28)

Outside this model of true pederasty, there were other male homoerotic relationships in ancient Greece, both in terms of age and status.[[29]](#endnote-29) The window of attraction varied somewhat according to individual preferences. Some younger partners could have been as old as twenty eight and Aristotle claimed that relationships based on love of character often continued after the loss of the beloved’s youthful beauty. It seems that some men enjoyed adopting the passive role and so continued this after reaching physical maturity. Some men switched from active passive roles and there is evidence of lifelong companionship.[[30]](#endnote-30)

In Athens, there were also homoerotic relationships between two equal males, free citizens. Some of these meetings occurred at the *symposium* (drinking party) or, more basically, isolated spots on the outskirts of Athens.[[31]](#endnote-31) Unlike later Rome, homoerotic relationships with slaves were not tolerated.

Dover cites evidence for ritualised homosexual abduction “rape”, forming legal relationships, in Crete, although he also says “it would be prudent to treat it as a special local development, irrelevant to the problem of the origins of the homosexual ethos.”There were also ceremonies forming formal, lifelong relationships between Scythian males.[[32]](#endnote-32)

There were two types of male prostitute (*pornoi*, used for “one night stands”, and *hetairekotes*, who were maintained as a more or less steady partner). Male prostitution was frowned upon and anyone acting as the passive partner in such a situation was punished.[[33]](#endnote-33) It has also been suggested (but also questioned) that there were weak, submissive, “effeminate call boys”, the *kinaidos* (plural *kinaidoi*). This last group were free (non-slave) youths or adults who sold themselves to individuals for sexual gratification and they almost always assumed the passive role. The *kinaidoi* used perfume and dressed in a feminine style. Eva Cantarella feels that at least some of those adopting these roles in Athens were “homosexual”.[[34]](#endnote-34) Halperin, by contrast, feels that the *Kinaidoi*, even if they existed, were quite distinct from the modern concept of a homosexual person.[[35]](#endnote-35)

The *kinaidos* was the equivalent of the *Cinaedus* in Rome. The latter had what was seen as a shameful and permanent desire, even as adults, to take a passive role and to be penetrated by other men. They had effeminate mannerisms and wore certain colours. These men were permanently stigmatised, and Amy Richlin has tentatively suggested that the term “passive homosexual” could be applied to them.[[36]](#endnote-36) However, the idea of a passive homosexual subculture in Ancient Rome has been questioned by Craig Williams.[[37]](#endnote-37) Richlin argues that the *Cinaedi*  faced the equivalent of severe modern “homophobia” with civil and social restrictions and victim-blaming sentiments.[[38]](#endnote-38) Many Roman texts describe such people as diseased, and remedies were designed in an attempt to treat the “condition.” [[39]](#endnote-39) Fathers might sometimes punish a son adopting the passive role, including having them killed. [[40]](#endnote-40) Hubbard states that the *Cinaedi* as a group appear too often in texts for them to be merely imaginary projections, but they may not have been associated only with sexual passivity; the term is also used about eunuchs, adulterers and married heterosexuals who were promiscuous.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Robin Scroggs believes that this last form of homoerotic behaviour, or other behaviours very similar to it, was that specifically being condemned in all the OT and NT texts. [[42]](#endnote-42) However, this view finds little support among other scholars. [[43]](#endnote-43) Brooten, for example, points out that ancient sources rarely speak of sexual relations between women and girls, but that Paul mentions women in Romans 1:26, before saying “In the same way, the men…” and she feels that this undermines the view that Paul was condemning only the “effeminate call boy”. [[44]](#endnote-44)

Homoerotic relationships were also very common in democracy and the military, where it was claimed that such relationships contributed to marked bravery.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Mark D. Smith, Bruce Thornton, William Loader and others state that there were also consensual, loving relationships between adults in classical Greece.[[46]](#endnote-46) In Plato’s Symposium, which was written c. 385-370 BC, nearly four centuries before Paul, Aristophanes, Phaedrus and Pausanias all give a positive view of same-gender eroticism.[[47]](#endnote-47) Robert Gagnon writes: “Aristophanes refers to men who are lovers of males as those ‘who continue with one another throughout life. . . . desiring to join together and to be fused into a single entity with his beloved and to become one person from two’ (192E). Pausanias, who was a lover of Agathon (a relationship that began when Agathon, now 31, was 18 years old), similarly emphasizes that lovers who love rightly ‘are prepared to love in the expectation that they will be with them all their life and will share their lives in common,’ ‘as if having been fused into a single entity with’ the soul of the beloved (181D, 183E). Consistent also with Aristophanes’ image of exclusive homosexual desire as an inherent trait is this remark of Pausanias: Men who love males ‘are not inclined by nature (phusei) toward marriage and the procreation of children, yet are compelled to do so by the law or custom (nomos)’ with the result that two joined males ‘live their lives out with one another unmarried’ (192A-B; my translations).”[[48]](#endnote-48) In the same paper, Gagnon also cites the speech of Callicratidas, the defender of male-male love in the pseudo-Lucianic “Affairs of the Heart” (c. 300 C.E.) and numerous other examples of loving homoerotic relationships in the Greco-Roman world.

Hubbard notes that “literature of the first century C.E. bears witness to an increasing polarization of attitudes toward homosexual activity, ranging from frank acknowledgment and public display of sexual indulgence on the part of leading Roman citizens to severe moral condemnation of all homosexual acts.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

NT Wright comments: “As a classicist, I have to say that when I read Plato's Symposium, or when I read the accounts from the early Roman empire of the practice of homosexuality, then it seems to me they knew just as much about it as we do. In particular, a point which is often missed, they knew a great deal about what people today would regard as longer-term, reasonably stable relations between two people of the same gender. This is not a modern invention, it's already there in Plato. The idea that in Paul's today it was always a matter of exploitation of younger men by older men or whatever … of course there was plenty of that then, as there is today, but it was by no means the only thing.”[[50]](#endnote-50)

However, others have disputed that Plato was aware of same-sex unions that were the equivalent of today’s same-gender, monogamous partnerships of love and faithfulness, intended to be permanent.[[51]](#endnote-51)

Dover concludes: “So long as we think of the world as divided into homosexuals and heterosexuals and regard the commission of a homosexual act, or even the entertaining of a homosexual desire, as an irrevocable step across a frontier which divides the normal, healthy, sane, natural and good from the abnormal, morbid, insane, unnatural and evil, we shall not get very far in understanding Greek attitudes to homosexuality.” [[52]](#endnote-52)

## Ancient Rome

We know quite a lot about sexual practices in ancient Rome from art, literature, inscriptions and archaeological remains and Rome was renowned for sexual license and abuse. Roman homoeroticism is closer in time to the NT world and to that of the early church, and homoerotic behaviour was quite common in Rome at that time. Under certain conditions it was accepted, but never in the way that it was celebrated in Athens or Sparta. It is claimed that, of the first fifteen Emperors, only Claudius was entirely heterosexual in his behaviour, and Nero is reported to have been in two same-gender “marriages” as well as being a sexual libertine in general. [[53]](#endnote-53) However, the exact nature of these and other same-gender "marriages" and their legal status is unknown. Julius Caesar, Caligula and Domitian were also notorious for their homoerotic behaviour, as well as adultery in the case of Julius Caesar. [[54]](#endnote-54)

The Greek model, of pederastic relationships between an adult male and a freeborn youth or boy, was strongly disapproved of in Ancient Rome, whether the active or the passive partner, and there was no educational component to Roman homoeroticism. [[55]](#endnote-55) However, it was common for Roman men, even if they were married, to have sexual relationships with male or female concubines, with young male and female slaves, male and female prostitutes, and especially with young boys (*pueri delicati*) or girls, but this was frowned upon if excessive or if the partner was freeborn. Wives would not necessarily approve of such relationships, but they would not have been surprised either.[[56]](#endnote-56) Adultery was regarded as particularly disgraceful.[[57]](#endnote-57) Hubbard states that only relationships with slaves were positively valued, from about 200 BCE, but even those were questioned by some and especially later on, when all homoerotic conduct was often criticised. However, by the Augustan period and the first century CE, the influence of pederasty was seen as less of a threat.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Hubbard suggests that frequent objections from wives may be evidence of considerable personal intimacy and affection in relationships with slaves but, even here, slaves could reject advances from their masters. However, acceding was an opportunity for slaves to improve their status and to become free men.[[59]](#endnote-59)

There was a particular street and a place by the River Tiber where one could find male prostitutes and sailors respectively. Public baths were also used. Juvenal refers to scratching one’s head with a single finger as an indication of a homoerotic inclination.[[60]](#endnote-60)

There is no record of same-gender female relationships in Rome.

There were also homoerotic relationships in the Roman military. Wartime rape of both sexes and prostitution were also recorded.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Prostitution, including male homoerotic prostitution, was a common, legal, public and tolerated phenomenon in Roman streets and baths, and involved mainly slaves, who nearly always served as the passive partner, but also entertainers and foreigners. Sometimes, a male prostitute was paid to penetrate his customer. [[62]](#endnote-62) Roman men in general seem to have preferred youths (male and female) between the ages of 12 and 20 as sexual partners, but older men could still prove attractive and professional prostitutes and entertainers might also have been considerably older. [[63]](#endnote-63) In Rome, the sexual dimension was emphasised more than in Greece. The Roman ideal of masculinity involved aggression and dominion, including in sexual life, and penetration was a symbol of masculinity. Much value was also placed on being especially well-endowed with a phallus and Craig Williams describes this concern with masculinity, domination and penetration as the “Priapic Model.”[[64]](#endnote-64)

Alongside the priapic model, there was another ideal of faithfulness in married life, and a few aspired to it but, in general, the priapic model was much more common.[[65]](#endnote-65)

There is also evidence in poetry of genuine love for boys, who were often, against all rules, free born, or even of noble lineage. Cantarella feels that this is evidence for genuine, “homosexual” romantic love. [[66]](#endnote-66)

Hubbard writes: “Homosexuality in this era [viz., of the early imperial age of Rome] may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation.”[[67]](#endnote-67)

Young male slaves in Rome often served as sexual partner to their master for a long time. Men could practice sex with slaves before getting married, and emotional bonds were not always excluded. Although, once married, these relationships became less tolerated, it was not unusual for a married Roman man to keep a *puer*. Although true pederasty was relatively rare in Rome, it may have existed around the classical age of Greece and, despite later laws against it, may have been practised in the last two centuries BCE, mainly by the social elite.[[68]](#endnote-68) There are no Latin words for our modern concepts of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” and very little evidence remains of the practices that helped form the homoerotic "model" in the century in which Paul lived. [[69]](#endnote-69)

# Female Homoeroticism

In Bernadette Brooten’s analysis of female homoeroticism in the ancient world, she argues that the ancients, particularly astrologers, recognized a plethora of lifelong orientations, and they produced a number of explanations to account for the phenomena.[[70]](#endnote-70) Some writers were disturbed by traditional role distinctions being impossible in female homoerotic relationships and they found the active female partner offensive.[[71]](#endnote-71) There was a widespread awareness of female homoeroticism among people in the Roman world with many (mainly men) writing about it and many others condemning it.[[72]](#endnote-72) Documented female homoerotic relationships of the time were probably nearly always between two adult females. There was no significant educational element and there is almost no evidence for female pederasty.[[73]](#endnote-73) Sources attest to a wide variety of female homoeroticism in the ancient world, including nymphomania, bisexuality and marriage.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Brooten also cites non-Christian and Christian material as evidence of a category of people viewed by the ancients as having a long-term or even lifelong homoerotic orientation, and a wide variety of terms were used. Clement of Alexandria used the term *Lesbia* about women who married other women, and Clement and other early Christians had terminology for both male and female same-gender activity, which they regarded as sinful.

Sources testify to female homoeroticism throughout the Roman Empire. Extant documents attesting to long-term or lifelong erotic orientations include vase paintings, postbiblical Judaistic writings, love spells commissioned by women to attract other women, ancient astrology, ancient medicine and a dream classification text. [[75]](#endnote-75)

A wide variety of people were involved in female homoeroticism, including female Christian monastics. [[76]](#endnote-76)

The extant sources nearly all express strong disapproval of female homoeroticism and, in Roman literature, it was also regarded as criminal.[[77]](#endnote-77) Christian and non-Christian views on female homoeroticism in the ancient and medieval periods were similarly critical and it was regarded as *para physin* (“unnatural”).[[78]](#endnote-78)

However, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds interestingly represent female homoeroticism as something in which Jewish daughters might engage, even daughters of priests and potential wives of priests. [[79]](#endnote-79)

Shenute of Atripe (4th to 5th century) was the head of a large Egyptian monastic community and he repeatedly warned his monks and nuns against sexual expression of any kind, including adult male and female homoerotic contact and pederasty. His writings suggest that some women felt and acted upon temptations of this nature.[[80]](#endnote-80)

One of the few positive descriptions of female homoeroticism (and one of the few to be written by a woman) is to be found in the poetry of Sappho, a Greek poet on the island of Lesbos in the 7th-6th century BCE. [[81]](#endnote-81) Sappho was married to a man named Cercylas, with whom she had a daughter named Cleis. It has been suggested that she was also a member of a special community of women named a *thiasos* but others have questioned this. She is the only female author to discuss her own erotic feelings but she does not tell us about her personal sexual practices, so it is not entirely certain that she actually indulged in homoerotic activity. However, her desires are mostly directed toward other women and Cantarella argues that they represent true love. [[82]](#endnote-82) Dover, too, says that “… a marked degree of mutual *eros* is assumed” in Sappho’s poetry. Alcman, who lived in Sparta at the turn of the sixth century BCE, also wrote songs about women’s beauty. Cantarella believes that Alcman’s verses are part of a nuptial ceremony between two women, and which acted as an initiation into a *thiasos*. She also believes that, unlike with men, sex during the initiation would be with a mistress or between two women of a similar age. Also, unlike male pederastic relationships, the relationship in these female marriages was less an educational relationship and was more an opportunity for free expression of reciprocated love between two equals who had chosen each other. There was no sense of domination or of obtaining experience to be used in a later relationship. [[83]](#endnote-83)

One Jewish writer describes marriage between women as a practice of Canaanites and Egyptians and several second century CE Syrian writers attest to marriage between women. [[84]](#endnote-84) The astrologer Ptolemy and the Christian Clement, both of Alexandria in Egypt, refer to women marrying other women from the 2nd (or possibly 1st) to 4th century CE. However, Lucian, in the 2nd century, also describes a marriage between a woman of the Greek island of Lesbos and a woman of Corinth. [[85]](#endnote-85)

The female homoerotic love spells described by Brooten all date from the second to fourth centuries CE and come from Egypt. [[86]](#endnote-86) She comments that when early Christian writers condemned sexual relations between women, they were responding to a social reality of the Roman world and, strikingly, the details of some of the spells correspond to Paul’s earlier writings in Romans 1:18-32. Brooten comments: “Even though these three spells probably all postdate Paul, they seem to represent what he would have viewed as the very worst of pagan idolatry, ungodliness, and wickedness.” [[87]](#endnote-87) She also points out that the nature of the spells also helps us to understand the attitudes of some other early Christians.

The astrological texts Brooten discusses[[88]](#endnote-88) are interesting because some of them may be from contemporaries of Paul. They attribute adulterous, homoerotic and promiscuous women and men, the *Cinaedi*, female prostitutes, eunuchs, the castrated Galli priests and hermaphrodites to different configurations of planets and constellations. One author also felt that certain constellations could make female homoeroticism “worse” or “more evil”, and he described those who practice it as “performing the acts of men”. Some regarded it as the equivalent of prostitution or of castrated men. Ptolemy listed female homoeroticism under “Diseases of the Soul”. Ptolemy and a later astrologer were also aware of female-female marriages and “lawful wives”. Interestingly, Firmicus Maternus, fourth century, believed that homoerotic desire was inborn and permanent, and he described configurations that led to it. Some of these views remain constant in astrological texts over the next few centuries.

In ancient medical writings, some authors classified some same-gender behaviours and desires as chronic diseases, with corresponding causes and treatments. These chronic diseases were seen as affecting the entirety of one’s identity. These authors thought that the patient suffering from such a disease had a lifelong identity characterized by unnatural behaviour. Ancient medical writers represented and helped to create the culture and framework of thinking in which early Christianity originated. For example, the work of the early Christian writer Tertullian (2nd-3rd century, Carthage, Africa) mirrors some early medical writing by Soranos of Ephesus, 2nd century (who studied Medicine in Alexandria, Egypt, and later served as a physician in Rome). Soranos regarded women who sought sexual relations with other women as mentally ill, with a disease of the soul, who needed to be treated by mind control. In common with other people of the time, Soranos saw passive males and active females as characterized by unrestrained lust and he felt that not being satisfied with the natural was contrary to divine providence. He also recognized bisexual women and believed that female homoerotics were themselves responsible for their condition, which he regarded as lifelong. Soranos felt his mind control therapy could cause remission and it seems that he regarded this to be sometimes permanent.[[89]](#endnote-89)

Another writer, Parmenides, felt that the condition of the effeminate male arose at conception and was the result of the female and male seeds asserting themselves as independent forces throughout the life of the individual and causing them to desire both active and passive sexual experiences.[[90]](#endnote-90) Another medical writer, Aurelianus, states that many other physicians thought the condition was an innate or inherited disease, passed on from generation to generation by way of the seed. It seems these latter medical thinkers saw male passivity and female homoeroticism as being due to something analogous to a mutant gene, induced by “shameful custom” and then hereditary. Under both the views of Parmenides and those described by Aurelianus, homoeroticism was seen as a lifelong condition. There were some other very strange ancient ideas about the medical causes of homoeroticism which even Soranos regarded as “absurd.”

The final material Brooten presents is ancient literature about interpreting dreams. This writing, again from the second century CE, also illustrates the view that female same-gender relationships were regarded as “unnatural”. [[91]](#endnote-91)

# Did The Ancient Writers Have Any Awareness Of A Homosexual Orientation?

Were the writers of the biblical texts that refer to homoerotic conduct aware of people with what we now refer to as a homosexual orientation, as opposed to people who chose to have intercourse with someone of the same sex? Were the ancients aware of loving, faithful same gender relationships? If so, did Paul and other writers of the time, both Christian and non-Christian, include such relationships in their condemnations? Scholarly opinions differ on these questions.

The first use of the term “homosexuality” was in German in 1868, and the term first appeared in an English translation of the Bible in 1946, when the original Revised Standard Version (RSV) appeared.[[92]](#endnote-92)

Scholars generally agree that the ancients (Biblical, Jewish, Assyrian, Greek or Roman) did not understand “homosexual orientation” or “homosexuals” in the sophisticated way we understand these ideas today, at least without significant qualification, and there was no word corresponding to “homosexuality”, “heterosexuality” or “bisexuality” in Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic.[[93]](#endnote-93) However, some scholars from both the conservative and progressive sides make a number of qualifications to the general view. [[94]](#endnote-94)

Some argue that the ancients (such as Josephus and Philo) saw homoeroticism as being due to excessive heterosexual lust, and that their views are therefore not relevant to contemporary culture.[[95]](#endnote-95) Moreover, some feel that, although there were various ancient attempts to explain same-gender erotic desire, no biblical writer shows any awareness of these ancient explanations and there is no mention of same-gender attraction in the creation stories. Victor Paul Furnish argues that no ancient account of sexual attraction comes close to modern understanding, achieved through biological, sociological and psychological work.[[96]](#endnote-96) Others disagree and Robert Gagnon additionally argues that “Philo and Josephus employed the excess-passion argument as a way of denigrating behaviour that on other grounds had been shown to be “contrary to nature”, not the other way round.” [[97]](#endnote-97)

John Boswell states: “The persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons…”[[98]](#endnote-98) However, other scholars do not accept this idea[[99]](#endnote-99) and many, in addition, regard the use of the term “homosexual” in relation to these times as anachronistic. [[100]](#endnote-100)

In his 1994 book, “Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe”, Boswell presents evidence that some of the Ancients in Greece, Rome and elsewhere were aware of people who seemed to be permanently attracted to people of the same gender and formed loving relationships together, including formal and legally-recognised unions. While some of Boswell’s work is no longer accepted, his findings are broadly in accord with some other scholars. [[101]](#endnote-101)

Conservatives generally think it possible that Paul was aware of “constitutional homosexuality” and that the biblical writers knew about both same-gender attraction without sexual intimacy, and of same-gender intimacy which was neither violent, commercial, nor pederastic, including caring relationships.[[102]](#endnote-102) As we have seen, the ancients produced explanations for why some people are attracted to members of their own sex and Robert Gagnon states that some of the views sound “remarkably like the current scientific consensus on homosexual orientation…” Dan O. Via accepts that in certain – perhaps small – circles in the ancient Mediterranean world there was some awareness of a homosexual disposition or orientation, but he thinks there is no clear evidence to support Gagnon’s view that Paul was familiar with one or more of the ancient theories about a congenital homosexual nature or orientation. [[103]](#endnote-103)

While generally siding with the conservatives, the authors of “Some Issues in Human Sexuality” also recognise that nearly all the examples of ancient same-gender behaviours that we have refer to people who were married or went on to be married; most of the people who indulged in same-gender intercourse were, in effect, either bisexuals or heterosexuals who chose to have same-gender intercourse.

Anthony Thiselton refers to the work of Christian Wolff, who cites a range of Greek literature which speaks of “genuine love” between male partners but who also acknowledges that the ancients possibly distinguished between “perversion” (people having intercourse with someone of the same gender contrary to their own inclination) and “inversion” (similar to the modern concept of a homosexual orientation). [[104]](#endnote-104)

Mark D. Smith, although of a conservative persuasion, urges caution in drawing too many conclusions from some of the material cited by Gagnon and others: “None of these sources can be considered representative of a general attitude in the Greco-Roman world, and none adequately parallels the modern concept of sexual orientation.” [[105]](#endnote-105)

There is evidence of patriarchal societies, ancient misogynistic and prejudiced views and moral disgust with homoeroticism at the expense of any cultural achievements, such as those of Sappho.

The evidence also shows that Christian and non-Christian views of homoeroticism were very similar, and that medical views (some of them very strange) influenced the views of early Christians such as Tertullian. Also, the views of moral disgust which Paul expressed were very similar to those articulated by astrologers (some of them contemporaries of Paul) and medical writers of just a century or two later. Paul’s views in Romans 1 of homoeroticism being due to idolatry are also seen in the female homoerotic love spells dating from just a few centuries later in Egypt.

In summary, it seems that some of the ancients were aware of people who had what we today call a “homosexual orientation” and they formulated explanations to account for the phenomena. Some of the medical ideas do indeed come surprisingly close to some modern views about a “genetic component”, while other medical and astrological beliefs will seem absurd to contemporary people. David Greenberg demonstrates that homosexuality is not a uniform phenomenon across time and place and he argues that homoerotic behaviour is produced and interpreted in different ways by different societies at different times.[[106]](#endnote-106) He believes that homosexuality is only deviant because society has constructed or defined it as deviant.[[107]](#endnote-107)

Many scholars believe that St Paul himself would have been aware of people who were naturally attracted to people of the same-sex, and who formed loving relationships or even formal unions, but we cannot be certain about this, since most of the materials we have were neither precisely contemporaneous nor originating in places where he worked, and none are directly related to him. Some of the manifestations of homoeroticism that Paul would probably have been familiar with, including paedophilia, pederasty and prostitution (especially with slaves), are very far removed from loving, committed, faithful gay relationships today. However, although Paul does not specifically exclude loving relationships from his teaching in Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 (if it is indeed by him), a key point, as Preston Sprinkle[[108]](#endnote-108) and others note, is that for St Paul and many of his contemporaries, same gender sexual behaviour was "contrary to nature" and was therefore not tolerated in any circumstances.

Based on some of the seven uses in Paul (1 Cor 11:14-15, Rom 11:13-24), progressives argue that *para physin* meant “(seriously) unconventional” [[109]](#endnote-109) whereas Robert Gagnon and other conservatives believe that, in this context, it has intertextual echoes with Genesis 1 and 2 and refers principally to gender discomplementarity and inability to procreate.[[110]](#endnote-110)

As even the progressive Nissinen puts it: "Paul does not mention *tribades* or *kinaidoi*, that is, female and male persons who were habitually involved in homoerotic relationships, but if he knew about them (and there is every reason to believe that he did), it is difficult to think that, because of their apparent ‘orientation,’ he would not have included them in Romans 1:24-27. . . . Paul speaks of homoeroticism as a practice that transgresses the boundaries of “nature” (*physis*) so, for him, no individual inversion or inclination would make this conduct less culpable . . . Presumably nothing would have made Paul approve homoerotic behaviour. ”[[111]](#endnote-111)

# Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the ancients and biblical writers were aware of a wide variety of homoerotic contacts and relationships, including loving relationships. While alternative readings of the biblical texts have been suggested, the vast majority of scholars, including progressives and/or gay/lesbian scholars such as Dan O. Via[[112]](#endnote-112), Louis Crompton[[113]](#endnote-113), Diarmaid MacCulloch[[114]](#endnote-114), William Schoedel[[115]](#endnote-115), Walter Wink[[116]](#endnote-116), Bernadette Brooten[[117]](#endnote-117) , Pim Pronk[[118]](#endnote-118) and Martti Nissinen[[119]](#endnote-119), are agreed that the biblical texts condemn intercourse between two males in any context, regardless of any loving disposition or orientation, and, in the case of Romans 1, probably between two females as well. Progressives who take this view have responded in a variety of ways: for Brooten, Romans 1:26ff is not authoritative[[120]](#endnote-120), MacCulloch believes that “in this, as in much else, the Bible is simply wrong”[[121]](#endnote-121), Wink also questions whether the Bible is correct, while for Nissinen “Ultimately, it all turned out to be about loving one’s neighbour as oneself…”[[122]](#endnote-122)

John Pike, 15.8.17

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97. Gagnon, 2001, p. 392, Schoedel, p. 45. Second point - Gagnon, 2001, p. 178 [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. Boswell, 1980, pp. 108-109, 112-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. See especially Hays, 1986, pp. 184-215; Also Gagnon, 2001, p. 393-4, Schoedel, p. 67-68; Grenz, 1998, p. 49-50; Scroggs, 1983, footnote 39, p.28; Crompton, p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. Williams, 2010, p. 190; Mark D. Smith, 1996, p. 225, Halperin, 1990, pp. 24-29, Nissinen and Furnish, for example [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. See, for example, Sprinkle, 2015, p. 61-64 [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. See, for example, Gagnon, 2001, p. 393 (2). [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Grenz, 1998, p.84-85; Gagnon 2001, pp. 350-360, 384-395; also “How Bad Is Homosexual Practice According to Scripture and Does Scripture’s Indictment Apply to Committed Homosexual Unions?” Available at[www.robgagnon.net](http://www.robgagnon.net/); <http://www.robgagnon.net/2Views/HomoViaRespNotesRev.pdf> (N94 and N95 notes); Via and Gagnon 2003, p.81; Schoedel, ed. Balch, pp. 43-72; Thiselton, 2003, p. 158-160; “Issues in Human Sexuality”, 2.16, p.12; Hubbard, p. 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Thiselton, ibid, p. 169-170 [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Mark D. Smith, 1996, 64: 223-54, especially N5, p. 225 [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Greenberg, p.25-123, 635. See also LeVay, 2011, p. 19-26 [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Greenberg, ibid, p.2, 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Sprinkle, 2015, pp. 91-102, 187-188 [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. McNeill, 1993, p. 54-56; E F Rogers, 1999, p. 64, 100, 263-4; Nissinen, Op. Cit., p. 105-6; Furnish, 1994, p. 30; J Rogers, p. 74; Via, 2003, p14; Sharpe, 2010, p. 50-51. See also David Prior, 1985, p.184. Vasey and Cranfield also feel that Paul is using *physis* in the same sense in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 11:14 (Vasey, 1995, p.131). See also Countryman, 1988, pp. 101-2; Thiselton, 2003, p. 176; Brownson, p. 235 [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Gagnon, 2001, p. 256, 258 (p. 254-270), 2003, p.100 and various articles, such as “How Bad Is Homosexual Practice According to Scripture and Does Scripture’s Indictment Apply to Committed Homosexual Unions?” available at [www.robgagnon.net](http://www.robgagnon.net/). See also Gagnon in Fulcrum postings; Stott, 1998, p.45; Grenz, 1998, p. 51-6; Hays, 1986, pp. 184-215, esp. p. 192-4, and 1996, p.386; Goddard, 2014, p. 13-17, 53-58; Ponsonby, 2013, p. 103, also citing Karl Barth; Davidson, 2015, p. 637; David F. Wright, 1989, p. 295; Sprinkle, 2015, p. 93-98. See Brownson, 2013, p. 28-9 for a detailed critique of this. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. See also Gagnon, <http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/ChristianSexualityArticle2003.pdf>, p. 140-152 [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Via, 2003, p. 11, 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. Crompton, 2003, p.114 [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. Diarmaid MacCulloch, “The Reformation: A History”, p. 705 [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. Schoedel, pp. 67-68 [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. Wink, 1999, [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. Brooten, 1996, p. 11, 106, 244, 253n, 257, 361 [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
118. Pim Pronk, “ Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality”, Eerdmans, 1993, p.279. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
119. Nissinen, 1998, p. 109-112 [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
120. Brooten, 1996, p. 302 [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
121. MacCulloch, ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
122. Nissinen, 1998, p. vi, Preface. See also Wink, 1999, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)