

Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York

**Legacies of Homosexuality in New Testament Studies:  
*Arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, fornicators and sodomites,  
in the history of sexuality and scripture**

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Master of Arts

by

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>I. ON HISTORY.....</b>	<b>6</b>
The Problematic History of “Homosexuality” .....	6
Positive Potential for the History of Homosexuality.....	10
<b>II. ON THE NEW TESTAMENT AND HOMOSEXUALITY .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Arsenokoitai</i> and <i>Malakoi</i> in 1 Corinthians.....	15
Sexual Exploitation and Slavery in the New Testament.....	22
Pauline Theology.....	26
Striking a Balance: Queer and Empire-Critical Theology.....	29
The “Real” Paul? .....	32
<b>III. ON SODOMY, AIDS, AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT .....</b>	<b>35</b>
“The Long Eighties” .....	35
The Rise of the Religious Right .....	36
The Bible, Homophobia, and HIV/AIDS .....	42
HIV/AIDS on the Margins .....	48
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>WORKS CONSULTED.....</b>	<b>53</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper will seek to address what, if any, ethical and moral proscriptions about homosexuality can be found in the Bible. Religious leaders and theologians as well as laypeople have for centuries sought to locate such proscriptions in the text of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul. However, such inquiries into Biblical texts on sexuality have had lasting and destructive effects in both academic and popular discourse. The study of “homosexuality” in the New Testament has had what I will argue are three harmful legacies: the construction of a false hetero/homosexual binary in the historiography of sexuality; the invisibilization of the subversive and anti-imperial aspects of Paul's theology; and the focus of HIV/AIDS discourse on gay communities to the exclusion of other marginalized groups in U.S. society. Showing causal links between biblical scholarship and the effects of negatively stereotyped portrayals of HIV/AIDS in the media would of course be impossible; however, I have been able to trace the paths of the historiography of sexuality in a way that illustrates some of the concurrences between a lack of intersectional, counterhegemonic analysis of marginalized groups in both the Roman Empire and the contemporary U.S., and the perpetuation of multiple forms of systemic oppression in the U.S. in recent years.

I will shape my argument by addressing the legacies of the historiography of homosexuality in turn, by taking a somewhat chronological approach. First, I will explore the ways in which homosexuality has been studied in the fields of history and New Testament studies, mapping early scholarly discourse around sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome with regards to Biblical literature. I will lay out the historiography of the study of ancient history and homosexuality, particularly those who have studied Paul's letter to the Romans and first letter to the Corinthians. What Paul condemns, I will argue, in those New Testament passages cited by those who seek Paul's opinions on “homosexuality,” are not those who we would describe today

as homosexuals; rather, Paul condemns specific forms of exploitative sexual exchanges that operated as part of the institutions and structures of slavery within the Roman Empire.

Third and lastly, I will map the timeline of these studies alongside the development of the organizations of the Religious Right<sup>1</sup> that appeared in the early 1980s, demonstrating the parallel developments of scholarly and political discourse on homosexuality during this time. In this section I will inquire into the effects that this discourse had amidst the onset of what came to be called the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Today we recall the history of HIV/AIDS most often with regards to the LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> community; however, as I will demonstrate in this paper, the link between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in the minds of the public starting at this time period was directly correlated to the increasing focus on homosexuality as a “sin” and an “abomination,” linked to Biblical precepts of “sodomy” (which are, I argue, inaccurate). Ultimately, I will argue that the focus of HIV/AIDS discourse on the LGBTQ community in the early stages of the epidemic was directly related to the neglect and lack of care resources directed at other marginalized groups severely affected by the epidemic. This was an ironic and tragic period in the history of Biblical interpretation, marked by the utilization of Pauline literature for oppression and fear-mongering, rather than lifting up those on the margins, as it was originally intended to do. This paper will take into account the harmful legacies of this period in the history of “homosexuality” in New Testament studies and the way this history was perpetuated in popular discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> On the characterization of groups of politically motivated conservative Christians in the U.S. (specifically those groups with a focus on combatting rights for gays, lesbians, and transgender persons) which in this paper will be identified collectively as the “Religious Right,” see Dudley Clendinen, *Out For Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 307-309.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper the acronym LGBTQ (which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) will be used in discussions pertaining to the contemporary social environment of, and movement for the rights of, persons of sexuality and gender minority status in the U.S.

This paper will also offer some potential resources to counter these oppressive theological effects. By prioritizing the focus of black female scholars of the history of the HIV/AIDS crisis such as Cathy Cohen, through the methodological lens of womanist historian and ethicist Emilie Townes, this paper will seek to function as an example of how counterhegemonic histories of homosexuality in New Testament studies can combat racism in academic discourse. This paper will argue for utilization of these counterhegemonic historical viewpoints alongside queer and empire-critical biblical exegetical hermeneutics in New Testament scholarship. Situated within a Biblical Studies discipline and methodology, my study will illustrate some of the ways in which current discourse makes use of New Testament logics. I will offer some criticism of current scholars of Paul who over-emphasize homosexuality and de-emphasize the history of racialized sexual exploitation in the Roman Empire. The hope, ultimately, is that queer and empire-critical scholarship in Biblical Studies will be recognized and taken up in anti-racist and intersectional<sup>3</sup> discourse around the political identities and rights of sexual and gender minorities.

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<sup>3</sup> Here I refer to the term articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article in the University of Chicago Legal Forum titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” to refer to “the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences.” The term “intersectionality” is used by some academics in reference to the effective interactions between the social forces of race, gender identity and/or expression, biological sex, sexuality, class, ability, citizenship, and other categories of individual experience and identity, with regards to structures of power and oppression, to acknowledge the significance of the variety of forces at play in various social and political arrangements. The concept of intersectionality has been particularly utilized in efforts to move away from frameworks in which only one category of identity is considered to be politically important—such as womanhood, homosexuality, etc. Though alternative structures have been put forth to subsume intersectionality in recent years (such as Jasbir Puar’s framework of “assemblages” posited in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2007]), the concept of intersectionality persists in discourses such as those in conversation with this author’s disciplinary fields that seek to foreground the complexity of human experience and combat oppression in its multiple and inter-connected forms.

## **I. ON HISTORY**

### **The Problematic History of “Homosexuality”**

It is partly the aim of this paper to examine how scholars of Biblical exegesis and history came to seek insights into the morality of homosexuality in the writings of Paul. However, it is important to first address some of the problems inherent in doing the history of sexuality in the ancient world. My aim in this section of this paper is to demonstrate, by exploring several prominent works in the historiography of homosexuality studies, that contemporary scholarly discourse around ancient forms of same-sex erotic activity focus overmuch on “homosexuality” as a concept. This concept has played a complicated and potentially destructive role in historiography, as an anachronism imposed upon ancient cultures. Within the discipline of history, scholars of “homosexuality” have tended to focus on that which is now seen as the male homosexual or “homonormative” model of gayness—that concentrated around same-sex erotic activities between males, and that most concerned with the subject of same-sex unions and marriage. Scholars focus these studies on ancient homosexuality and ignore (at best) or deliberately omit (at worst) consideration for the constructions of prostitution, exploitation, and racialized slavery in the historical subjects of their discourse. The grave consequences of those omissions will be illustrated in later sections of this paper.

It must be noted that most of the scholarly projects that have been aimed at getting at the “original” intent of the New Testament authors have run into the conundrum of the plain and simple fact that much Classical work scholars turn to in the study of “homosexuality” in the ancient world have no equivalent synonyms in the English language. Conversely, it has been pointed out by many, there is no word for “homosexual” in the New Testament language of *koinē* Greek. Not only are there no equivalent referents, but our systems of thinking that revolve around the concept of sexuality—including psychology, biology, and so on—were not constructs

in the lingual system of the culture of *koinē* Greek speakers. Historian David Halperin takes up this argument: “There is no ancient Greek or Latin term equivalent to “homosexual,” just as we have no word *pectoriphagos* to identify someone who prefers or eats only chicken; it is simply a meaningless distinction, because the ancients did not think in terms of sexuality, just as we do not think in terms of ‘dieticity.’”<sup>4</sup>

Michel Foucault’s publication of his *Will to Knowledge* (the first in his three-volume series, the *History of Sexuality*) in 1976 provided groundbreaking insights and marked a sea change in the way the sexual self existed as a subject of historical study. Foucault (who died of complications from AIDS in 1984)<sup>5</sup> hypothesized that before the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no word for “homosexual” nor indeed a cultural construction of sexuality as a defining characteristic of an individual marked by one’s sexual object or attraction predilection. Rather, Foucault asserted, the term “homosexual” was coined by Karoly Benkert in 1869, thus sparking the beginning of the nominal heterosexual/homosexual binary in modern semantics.<sup>6</sup> Before this, theorized Foucault, the only word for a person who engaged in same-sex erotic activities was “sodomite.” (The history of the advent of this term will be discussed later in this paper.) The 19<sup>th</sup> century was also characterized by the beginning of a shift away from labeling persons who engaged in the “sin of Sodom” as “sodomites” or “sodomists” based on their actions, and instead toward the use of term “homosexual” which was coined, Foucault notes, as a word denoting the

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<sup>4</sup> David Halperin, “One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 15-40. While we do have concepts such as veganism and vegetarianism, Halperin admits, these words are not simply referents to those who only put certain types of food in their mouths. Veganism as a “dieticity” or lifestyle when evoked in the language of the contemporary United States also carries with it connotations of liberal political values, opposition to the brutal ways in which meat is created and processed, and other systems of beliefs and behaviors beyond the simple practice of refusing animal-based foods, just as the word *pectoriphagos* would have had cultural connotations in *koinē* Greek beyond the practice of eating only chicken.

<sup>5</sup> James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Kuefler, “Introduction,” in *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, ed. Matthew Kuefler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10.

*species* of male person<sup>7</sup> with this proclivity as an essential part of their nature.<sup>8</sup> It is from this period of shift onward that the word “homosexual” began to be used ubiquitously in psychological literature.<sup>9</sup>

John Boswell’s publication of his historical treatise *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the 14<sup>th</sup> Century* in 1980 was the next benchmark study in the history of the history of homosexuality. His project was to show through analysis of ancient and medieval Greek and Latin resources of the Church that homosexuality had been acceptable and even celebrated by early Christians, and not penalized or frowned-upon in Christianity until the Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup> *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* was a mammoth in-depth treatment of ancient resources devoted to same-sex relations, and its sequel *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* which focused on weddings and other commitment ceremonies between persons of the same sex was groundbreaking, the like of which no one in the study of history had ever seen before. It was lauded as a brilliant study, one that would take its place next to the work of Foucault—who

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<sup>7</sup> By virtue of the nature of the reference to Sodom, those who are said to commit the “sin of Sodom” have historically been male referents only—not females who engage in same-sex or “lesbian” encounters. On the use of the term “sodomy” to only refer to men, in both historic and contemporary language, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 242, 313.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 43. Foucault’s theories on the relationship between power and sexuality in terms of state and subject are worthy of extensive reconsideration in light of the project herein being considered: the project of reconfiguring today’s debates on the history of homosexuality in terms of power and exploitation. Foucault hypothesized in his *History of Sexuality* that the late-19<sup>th</sup> century saw the first shifts toward governance of the individual subject (as opposed to general populations).

<sup>9</sup> This area, the development of the category of “homosexuality” in the areas of psychology and the state, deserves further treatment but it is not within the scope of this paper to address it at great length in this section on history and historiography. For a detailed treatment of this turn-of-the-century shift (i.e. towards language of “homosexuals” in psychology following Karoly Burkert’s publications), see Mark Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk About Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xix.

<sup>10</sup> See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



himself wrote the blurb on the book's back cover. Like Foucault, Boswell also passed away due to complications from AIDS, ten years later in 1994.<sup>11</sup>

But Boswell, for all the fame garnered by the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, was subject to a great degree of criticism as well. Boswell's contemporary critics included a number of prominent scholars of sexuality. The main criticism leveled against Boswell was his taking for granted the anachronistic concept of "homosexuality."<sup>12</sup> Walter Kendrick, who wrote for the *Village Voice* at the time and is a professor of English Literature at Fordham, penned his criticism: "The very concept of "selfhood," of a private individuality unique to each human being... simply did not exist until the very end of the period with which Boswell is concerned."<sup>13</sup> Boswell's later critics included historian David Halperin, who literally wrote the book on *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. Halperin cautioned that "re-describing same-sex sexual contact as homosexuality is not as innocent as it may appear: indeed, it effectively obliterates the many different ways of organizing sexual contacts and articulating sexual roles that are indigenous to human societies."<sup>14</sup> The debate over the existence of "homosexual" identity before the end of the nineteenth century, which began circa the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, has

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<sup>11</sup> David W. Dunlap, "John E. Boswell, 47, Historian Of Medieval Gay Culture, Dies," *The New York Times*, December 25, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> It should be pointed out that Boswell *did* make an effort to account for his use of the word "homosexuality" in an anachronistic way in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. "One must be extremely cautious," he wrote, "about projecting onto historical data ideas about gay people inferred from modern samples," (p. 24). And also: "In the ancient world so few people cared to categorize their contemporaries on the basis of the gender to which they were erotically attracted that no dichotomy to express this distinction was in common use... no one thought it was useful or important to distinguish on the basis of genders alone, and the categories "homosexual" and "heterosexual" simply did not intrude on the consciousness of most Greeks or... Romans," (pp. 57-59). But in the end he deferred for the sake of his project: "the difficulties of avoiding anachronistic projections... will be outweighed by the advantages," (pp. 31).

<sup>13</sup> As cited in Kuefler, *The Boswell Thesis*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 46.

come to be known as the essentialist/social-constructionist debate.<sup>15</sup> Basically, scholars debate this lingering question: is there an essential quality of same-sex attraction intrinsic to some persons, or is such a thing socially-constructed much the way gender itself, race, or other qualities are constructed?<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most glaring omission in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* was Boswell's lack of reference to systematic slavery and sexual exploitation in the Roman Empire—the system in which the majority of same-sex encounters took place in the time of the New Testament authors.<sup>17</sup> By virtue of the fact that discourse on homosexuality in the ancient world is centered around Boswell's book, there is now a seemingly permanent link between the study of “homosexuality” in the ancient world, and the study of the Christianity and “social tolerance” for homosexuality (or, as the case may be, a lack thereof) to the exclusion of the intersecting ways in which marginalization, exploitation, and oppression function to do violence toward disempowered groups—those characterized by their gender or sexuality, or not.

### **Positive Potential for the History of Homosexuality**

The history of homosexuality cannot adequately address oppressive social forms if it is not an intersectional discipline that looks at how marginalization occurs across sex, race, gender, and other characteristics. History can be defined as the way we construct our perception of our temporality in relation to the power structures that govern our lives and the lives of those around us. History is part of what either challenges or maintains those power structures. The same power structures that have existed as legacies of racial slavery exist today in the form of unjust systemic

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<sup>15</sup> See Kuefler, *The Boswell Thesis*, 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> For an in-depth treatment of this debate and the proponents of both sides, see Kuefler, *The Boswell Thesis*, 1-34.

<sup>17</sup> This omission has been written about extensively; see especially Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

and insidious economic exploitation of persons of color and in the racist formulations of the criminal justice system. The discipline of history has been complicit in this persisting legacy. As Bernadette Brooten, historian and scholar of same-sex erotic activity in the New Testament, writes in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, "In today's world, slavery's legacies for sexuality and marriage are myriad...facing up to slavery can free people and society from its taint...but that requires taking an earnest look at the persistent effects of slavery on social values, religious thought, and economic realities."<sup>18</sup>

Brooten cites Emilie Townes, a leading Christian ethicist and scholar of womanism (the school of thought that focuses on the history and experiences of Black women, and their exploitation, liberation, and survival), who traces the racist history of classism as a legacy of slavery in the U.S. Townes traces this history in detail, illustrating for instance the ways in which acquiring property and capital during the Industrial Revolution was limited to whites, to show that ideals of individual hard work and virtue excluded people of color but managed to mask the aspect of racism, functioning doubly to both exclude people of color from wealthy elite society *and* render such exclusions invisible.<sup>19</sup> Brooten and Townes together have called for a sexual ethics that includes recognition of the harmful legacies of slavery, and understanding and moving towards a future where it is understood that all persons are deserving of freedom.<sup>20</sup> Townes argues that history is a key component in how hegemony gets created through what she calls "the cultural production of evil" and the "fantastic hegemonic imagination." She writes:

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<sup>18</sup> Bernadette Brooten, "Introduction," in *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3-5.

<sup>19</sup> Emilie Townes, "From Mammy to Welfare Queen: Images of Black Women in Public-Policy Formation," *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, ed. Bernadette Brooten (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61-74.

<sup>20</sup> See Brooten, *Beyond Slavery*, 17.

*The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples' lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination... uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape its worldview. It sets in motion whirlwinds of images used in the cultural production of evil. These images have an enormous impact on how we understand the world, as well as others and ourselves in that world. Subjugation and consent sashay to deadly images that are largely unchecked until they lose their force and are replaced by more deadly and sinister images such as the movement from the Black Matriarch to the Welfare Queen.<sup>21</sup>*

In the fantastic hegemonic imagination of today, African-American slave experiences are erased, gay history is whitewashed, and the complicity of white gay historians in perpetuating the legacies of slavery is invisibilized and thus permitted to continue. (The significance of “welfare queen” imagery in gay history and the contemporary LGBTQ rights movement will be addressed later in this paper.)

The history of homosexuality, when omitting any confession to its legacy as a predominantly white academic discipline, reinforces a colorblindness in the idea of the LGBTQ movement as encompassing intersecting forms of race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, etc. Through colorblindness, the movement is seen as a beautiful “rainbow” that uplifts every and all queer experience, regardless of race, which is simply not the case. It has been noted that the “rainbow movement” is just as guilty of structural racism as the heteronormative and oppressive structures it seeks to combat.<sup>22</sup> These structural racisms pervade the legacies of slavery that Townes describes. As Michelle Alexander writes, of colorblindness:

*Our blindness prevents us from seeing the racial and structural divisions that persist in society: the segregated, unequal schools, the segregated, jobless ghettos, and the segregated public discourse—a public conversation that excludes the current pariah caste. Our commitment to colorblindness extends beyond individuals to institutions and social arrangements. We have become blind, not so much to race, but to the existence of racial caste in America.<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21.

<sup>22</sup> For a lengthy treatment of this argument see especially Jasbir Puar, “To Be Gay and Racist is No Anomaly,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

Townes seeks to combat this effect, writing in favor of developing “countermemory,” citing Gramsci’s concept of counterhegemony, which “seeks to open up not only the subversive spaces of counterhegemony, it argues also for a reconstitution of history such that we begin to see, hear, and appreciate the diversities in our midst as flesh and blood rather than as cloying distractions within the fantastic hegemonic imagination.”<sup>24</sup> It is the task of the gay historian, now, to develop this kind of countermemory in constructing our collective memory of same-sex erotic encounters in history, including keeping in our sights the history of racial slavery in the U.S. and its legacies.

David Halperin recognizes that no history of ancient Greek sexualities is so multifaceted as to treat each form of sexuality comprehensively—such a volume would have to include the study of slavery, and the “varieties of prostitution and prostitutes... life-stages... 'men' and 'women.’”<sup>25</sup> It is ingenuous of Halperin to delve into the area of slavery here. It is the characterization of the essentialist-social constructionist debate as one centered around consenting sexual encounters that clouds scholars’ awareness of the potential for opening up this discussion to including other factors as well, i.e. economic exploitation and race. Halperin is correct in noting that, in the Roman Empire (as well as in other periods of history), sexual encounters were part of a broadly hierarchical society marked throughout by widely dynamic differences in relative power. Land-owning men were “citizens” of the empire, and all others—women, children, foreigners, and especially slaves—were considered less than human, and subject to sexual exploitation.

“Slave,” in this context, does not denote a victim of the institution of racialized chattel slavery of the Americas up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be bought and sold as commodities, but denotes one member of a class of Roman resident common in the everyday workings of the empire;

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<sup>24</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

slaves in the Roman Empire could be artisans or even business managers.<sup>26</sup> But just because Roman slavery is not in all ways comparable with American chattel slavery does not mean it was in any way less harmful to its victims. Sex work and sexual enslavement were common, especially among those taken captive during conflict and conquest of foreign nations. It is here that race and rape must be addressed in the historical study of sexuality; in the Roman Empire the enslavement of human beings from conquered nations and use of those persons for sexual exploitation was commonplace, and same-sex erotic encounters<sup>27</sup> were almost always characterized by an extreme imbalance of power between two parties.<sup>28</sup>

Same-sex encounters in the Roman Empire taking place between citizens would of course need to be studied through a different lens than those taking place between citizens and slaves—the next section on this paper, on the discipline of New Testament scholarship, will address such issues. In the next section of this paper, the ways in which “homosexuality” has been studied in Biblical scholarship will be addressed, and in particular the ways in which New Testament language has been constructed to be equivalent in meaning to “homosexuality” at times and “sodomy” at others. Later, this paper will address how this terminology has been used in homophobic discourse amongst prominent members of Religious Right organizations.

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<sup>26</sup> See Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> A word about the term “encounters” when writing about experiences during slavery. Some may object, insisting that this word does not do justice to experiences of sex during slavery where one person is entirely bereft of the ability to give consent, and that these experiences can only be described as rape. The famous case of Sally Hemings comes to mind. As historians, I believe we are pulled in ambivalent directions in the methodology of describing rape: on the one hand, we want to be as authentic and true to our primary sources as we can, without projecting 21st-century terminology and categories onto the past; on the other hand, we want to dig deeper into the roots of the human experience as they were lived and felt and perhaps coded and/or invisibilized in past times. Perhaps we cannot access them through the primary authors' own words alone. I hope this paper's explication does justice to this tension and holds to account the highly problematic and violent history of rape during slavery and beyond.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion see Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 36-37.

## **II. ON THE NEW TESTAMENT AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

### ***Arsenokoitai* and *Malakoi* in 1 Corinthians**

It is worth investigating the literature from the time period when Paul wrote the two letters in question, 1 Corinthians and Romans, in order to offer a glimpse at the meaning of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*. It should be noted that these terms, arguably, cannot be examined separately from the context of Paul's theology and his project of communication throughout the ongoing development of the early communities of the followers of Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Nor can they be separated from Paul's theology with regards to slavery and economic exploitation in sexual relationships. This will be taken into consideration as well. This section will consider the work of Biblical studies scholars John Boswell, Robin Scroggs, and others working in that same time period circa 1981 to 1987 in order to put into historical perspective the question of how Paul's views on homosexuality were studied during the period at issue here. I will suggest, after reviewing this literature, that what this discourse *leaves out* – the issue of racialized sexual slavery in the Roman empire – will be revealed to be a grave omission in discussions of homosexuality both ancient and modern.

The text most commonly read in seeking Biblical literature about homosexuality in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, which reads:

(9) *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (malakoi), sodomites (arsenokoitai), (10) thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. (11) And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (NRSV)*

Derrick Sherwin Bailey wrote one of the first and most pivotal books on homosexuality and Biblical ethics in 1955, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, in which he argues that the term *arsenokoitai* was probably a neologism, perhaps invented by Paul himself, made up

for his own use in 1 Corinthians.<sup>29</sup> Paul's use of the term in that epistle is widely considered to be the first instance of the term in ancient literature. The word was probably derived from the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 (“You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination,” NRSV) and 20:13 (“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them,” NRSV).<sup>30</sup> The word *arsen* refers to “male” and the word *koitai* comes from the Greek word for “bed” and roughly translates as “those who lie” or “those who go to bed.”<sup>31</sup> Bailey argued that *arsenokoitai* refers to actions, not to a fundamental behavior characteristic or identity the way we conceptualize “homosexuality” today, and that there was no such condition as “homosexuality” known by that or any other name in the climate of Paul's writings.<sup>32</sup> Bailey's methodology was purely literary-critical; with Paul's writings as the only resource he drew upon in developing his ethics, he did not draw from other classical sources.

Bailey's work was countered by John Boswell, in his pivotal and controversial historical study *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* published in 1980. Boswell's aim was to show that same-sex relationships had been moderately to fully tolerated and even celebrated in the early Christian communities up to the Middle Ages. His book was revolutionary when it was published; nothing like it had ever been seen before. In the section devoted to Paul's epistles to the Corinthians, Boswell argues that *arsenokoitai* referred to active male prostitutes, and did not

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<sup>29</sup> Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1955).

<sup>30</sup> Scholars generally agree that Paul would have been well acquainted with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint or LXX (for the 70 books it contained). From what little we know of Paul's biography from the source of the Book of Acts and others, Paul was born in the Jewish community of Tarsus in the north of Judea. The scope of this paper unfortunately does not permit a lengthy treatment of the events of Paul's life; it must suffice to simply note that, being raised in a Jewish society, and being trained in reading and writing through intensive study of the Torah, Paul would have had a keen familiarity with the details of Jewish scriptures.

<sup>31</sup> See David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of *Arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae*, 38 (1984): 125-153.

<sup>32</sup> See Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, 39.



connote anything like “homosexual,” let alone “sodomite.”<sup>33</sup> Boswell was the first to suggest that Paul was condemning a specific form of prostitution with his invocation of *arsenokoitai*, and that Paul would probably not have disapproved of consensual same-sex relationships between adults. While Boswell's study received an enormous amount of positive attention and approval in both the scholarly community and his mainstream audience, there were many vocal critics of the book, stirring up quite a bit of controversy around the study. Boswell's treatment of the works of Latin church fathers such as Tertullian, Arnobius, Lactantius, John Chrysostom, and others who wrote interpreting Biblical positions on same-sex relationships was criticized for its many omissions and errors. His work could have paved the way much more in theological communities on behalf of homosexuals if these points had not been as widely criticized.

Just a few years after Boswell's controversial study was published, Robin Scroggs, professor of New Testament studies at Union Theological Seminary, put forth the first-ever monograph devoted solely to the parts of the New Testament that have been interpreted as referring to same-sex erotic activity, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (1986). Scroggs argued, bravely for his time, that Paul's condemnation in 1 Corinthians was not referring to homosexuals or those who engage in consensual same-sex activities, but to those who engaged in exploitative forms of sex work and sex trafficking, and that Biblical passages “should no longer be used in denominational discussions about homosexuality.”<sup>34</sup> He argued that *arsenokoitai* was not originated by Paul, but was derived through rabbinic discussions of Leviticus, and that the term would have been nearly

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<sup>33</sup> See Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 346. It may come as a surprise to some that the word “sodomite” never occurs in the Bible, in any language. (In the Old Testament of course there is the story of the destruction of Sodom, and there are references to the “sin of Sodom” and the “people of Sodom” in other books, such as Ezekiel. There are also references to the city of Sodom in the New Testament, but not its people. Paul never mentions Sodom at all, except within a quote from the book of Isaiah which mentions Sodom.) Thus the idea of the “sin of Sodom” can be traced to Biblical texts, but not “sodomy” or “sodomites.”

<sup>34</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality*, 127.

meaningless to non-Jewish Greeks (or Gentiles) who didn't at least have some familiarity with Torah law. Scroggs argued further that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* referred to counterparts in sexual encounters where prostitution and economic exploitation were involved—that *malakoi* would have had the meaning of a specific role, something similar to an “effeminate call-boy” or passive recipient in penetrative sex, and that *arsenokoitai* would have meant the active partner “who keeps the malakos as a mistress or hires him on occasion.”<sup>35</sup> He interprets this by way of mentioning that they appear side by side in 1 Timothy as well, along with a third term, *andropodistai*, which was used in several other ancient sources to describe one who is a kidnapper or, literally, a slave-dealer.<sup>36</sup> Scroggs interprets the author of 1 Timothy's inclusion of *andropodistai* in his list of vices as a reference to specific forms of the sex economy “which consisted of the enslaving of boys as youths for sexual purposes.”<sup>37</sup> If this institution of sexual slavery was being condemned in 1 Timothy and even in 1 Corinthians, then it is slavery and rape which must be the subject of counterhegemonic scholarship on *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in the New Testament—not “homosexuality” as such.

The word *malakoi* literally means “soft” and has the construction of a male noun, thus it can be said to have been used in 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek to mean “soft ones,” but it has been interpreted to carry sexual connotations, along with connotations of softness and texture (literally meaning softness in clothing, as in the Matthew 11:8 description of soft garments), as well as rich foods, laziness, extravagance, and decadence; food can be “*malakos*” in *koinē* Greek, as can a gentle breeze or a patch of moss to sit on.<sup>38</sup> It can also refer, it has been argued, to adult men who seek to retain something of the bodily structure of the passive young boy in pederastic

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<sup>35</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Karl Gnuse, *Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says about Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 145.

relationships, or *eromenos*, playing the passive role in sexual dynamics—also shaving their body hair, wearing makeup, and maintaining a diet that would lead to a softer and less muscular body.<sup>39</sup> Some Latin materials seem to refer to *malakoi* this way.<sup>40</sup> The word *malakoi* was translated as “weaklings” in the 1525 Tyndale New Testament, “wantons” in the 1587 Geneva Bible, “debauchers” in the 1852 James Murdock translation, “licentious” in the 1904 Ernest Malan translation, and “sensual” in the 1923 Edgar Goodspeed translation. But it has been noted that it is crucial that *malakoi* not be studied without the word *arsenokoitai* alongside it. The two terms are even combined in some translations; the RSV (1946) translates *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* as one word, “homosexuals,” and the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition RSV (1971) combines them again into “sexual perverts.”

Part of the aim of this project is to examine what Paul intended to convey in his condemnation of *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians. The word *arsenokoitai* has been translated variously over recent centuries as “men who abuse themselves with mankind” (KJV), “men who have sex with men” (NIV), “homosexuals” (NAS), and most recently, “sodomites” (NRSV). One aspect of the recently scholarly debates over the meaning of this term is linguistic. Biblical scholars and experts on *koinē* Greek syntax have disagreed over which part of the word, *arseno* or *koitai*, is the object of the word, that is whether the word emphasizes the action of lying-with, or the character of the males involved—their question then has been, is it the action or the identity of the *arsenokoitai* being condemned by Paul? Is *arsenokoiten* an action they take part in, or a part of their fundamental character as people?

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<sup>39</sup> Gnuse, *Trajectories of Justice*, 145.

<sup>40</sup> For further explanation of this term see Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality*, 60-63. The author lists the following several examples: Dionysius of Helicarnassus (1<sup>st</sup> cent CE) speaks of a ruler, Aristodemas, who was nicknamed *Malakos*: “either because he became effeminate as a child and experienced things suitable to women, as some narrate, or because he was gentle by nature and *malakos* toward anger.” And Seneca the Elder speaks of a foppish womanizer thusly: “dripping with foreign perfumes, crippled by his lusts, walking more *softly* than a woman in order to please women—and all the other things that show not judgment but disorder.”

Several scholars in recent Biblical studies scholarship have pointed out that this discussion has major implications both for how we conceptualize ancient sexuality, and how we conceptualize our own. Bailey believed the *arseno-* part of the word to be adjectival, not the object of the *koitai*, which refers to the action of going to bed. Boswell agreed, in his argument that *arsenokoitai* meant “active male prostitutes.” Scroggs, on the other hand, takes *koitai* to be the active part, and the *arseno-* as the object of the second part, dovetailing from Boswell's interpretation in this regard.<sup>41</sup> Another scholar, David Wright, insists that the term indicates that the *arseno-* part is the object, and that *arsenokoitai* can be translated simply as “a male who sleeps with a male.” Wright was a vocal critic of Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, and argued that *arsenokoitai* can definitely be thought of as referring directly to homosexuality, not just active male prostitutes or pederasty.<sup>42</sup> This debate is significant because each author's agenda for contemporary homosexuality is brought into play. Boswell sought to gain full inclusion of homosexuals in church environments, and sought to prove that there was such a thing as homosexuality in the ancient world—and that it was very much accepted. Wright, on the other hand, opposed homosexuality and its acceptance in church environments, and so he comes down on the issue of whether “homosexuality” existed in the ancient world or not strongly in favor of the former, in the interest of demonstrating that it was strongly condemned in early Christian communities.

Scroggs, importantly, disagreed with Boswell's interpretation of *arsenokoitai* but not with his goal of seeking full inclusion for gays and lesbians in churches. Scroggs advocated for exegeting the use of the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* specifically within the genre of the “vice lists” found in the New Testament, of which there are several. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul

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<sup>41</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality*, 107.

<sup>42</sup> For an excellent explanation of the dialectics of this debate, see David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of *Arsenokoitai*.”

includes prohibitions of “*porneia*, idolaters, adulterers, *arsenokoitai*, *malakoi*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and robbers.” In 1 Timothy 1:9-10 is listed “the lawless, disobedient, godless, sinful, unholy, and profane,” as well as murderers of parents, murderers in general, *porneia*, *arsenokoitai*, *andropodistai* (slave-traders), liars, and perjurers. Romans 11 lists wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, hatred of God, insolence, haughtiness, boasting, inventing evil, rebelliousness toward parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness. Many vice lists have sexual behaviors and economic behaviors listed side by side. Scroggs posits that by including various types of vices like greed and envy along with murder, the authors sought to draw their audience's attention to the severity of the results of coerced sex, especially in the form of sexual slavery, in Greco-Roman society. Being condemned was not “homosexuality” but sexual slavery.

The history of racial slavery is invisibilized in this area of scholarship, as well as in other disciplines within the academy, and has left harmful legacies in American society. The question, then, remains: if we study the history of homosexuality without interrogating the culture of rape and sexual violence in the Roman Empire, not to mention the histories of slavery, rape, and domestic violence in the U.S., what are we invisibilizing? In this history that has been shaped by Biblical narratives and Christian authority structures, what, if omitted from history, is being permitted to continue? We cannot continue to ignore it; if we do, these legacies will continue to ferment in the systemic and insidious inequalities that pervade the U.S. today. What is needed, now, are forms of history that function as Townes' configurations of counterhegemony—functioning to shape our awareness of systems of oppression and injustice, that serve to interrogate history in order to create a more just world in the present. What is needed, too, are forms of history that do not promote but which, instead, complicate or *queer* the modern

constructions and binaries seen in historical discourse on “homosexuality” and turn them instead into more just historical discourses.

### **Sexual Exploitation and Slavery in the New Testament**

Recently, some scholars have begun to assert that New Testament studies must move past the debate on what the text has to offer on the subject of homosexuality, and to examine what our own interpretations of the text say about the world in which we form our views. Dale Martin, currently a professor of Religious Studies and New Testament studies at Yale, has written extensively on 1 Corinthians and Pauline theology and argues that *arsenokoitai* refers to a specific kind of “economic exploitation by means of sex,” but “perhaps not necessarily by homosexual sex,” and that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* refer not to homosexuality at all, but to sexual exploitation and prostitution.<sup>43</sup> But he cautions against reading any Biblical text with the aim of seeking the “original sense” of the author's intent. “History,” he writes, “is not an accurate precept.”<sup>44</sup> There is something Martin calls the “myth of textual agency”—that a text “speaks,” as if it has a self. This, Martin writes, is false. We, the readers, are the ones with agency, making meaning *from* a text.<sup>45</sup>

Martin conducts his exegesis under the maxim that “any interpretation of Scripture that hurts people, oppresses people, or destroys people cannot be the right interpretation, no matter how traditional, historical, or exegetically respectable.”<sup>46</sup> Scholars such as Robert Goss, Patrick

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<sup>43</sup> Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 43.

<sup>44</sup> For Martin's criticism of N.T. Wright's “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of *Arsenokoitai*” see Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 13-14.

<sup>45</sup> For Martin's criticism of Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, see Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 13-14.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 50.

Cheng, Kathleen Talvacchia have developed the discipline of Queer Theology in recent years to do exactly that.<sup>47</sup> One could argue that no reading of the New Testament which frames its inquiry in terms of seeking what the text “says” about homosexuality can be a correct one, since this bestows false agency upon a text, and such framing utilizes the construct of “homosexuality” itself, while putting its rightness or wrongness in the precarious position of almost asking the text for permission or approval—especially when the author's intention of doing so is not clearly stated. This configuration will only allow oppression of homosexuals, as well as queer, bisexual, and transgender persons, to continue. A more progressive approach, according to Martin, would be to inquire as to how forms of oppression in the Roman Empire and elsewhere can be studied to combat instances of those forms of oppression in our own time, and to combat them in the interest of justice.

Robert Carl Gnuse is another scholar who has recently sought to discourage discourse of “homosexuality” in the Roman Empire, and to shift the discourse towards considerations of power-differentials, slavery, and exploitation. Gnuse has argued in *Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says about Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality* that central to Paul's prohibitions in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere is not the concept of same-sex erotic activity among consenting adults, but the concept of rape in battle and conquest. One man raping another in battle, according to Gnuse, was not considered an act of “homosexuality” in terms of conceiving the basis of the arousal as attraction to a member of one's own sex, but was considered part of a centuries-old martial tradition of claiming dominance over conquered peoples.<sup>48</sup> In the Roman Empire, there was an emphasis on strict distinction between active and passive sexual roles, where passivity in penetrative sex was associated usually with femininity but also with

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<sup>47</sup> For examples of works in the field of queer theology, see works by Robert Shore-Goss, Patrick Cheng, and others in Kathleen Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore, eds., *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Gnuse, *Trajectories of Justice*, 145-149.

subordination and obedience.<sup>49</sup> Conquering Roman armies would make a practice of raping the soldiers they defeated in battle, as a political statement of victory and power over the enemy.

This can help scholars who wish to exegete the Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis as part of an analysis of the use of the word “sodomite” in translating *arsenokoitai* in the New Testament. It can be argued that the Sodom narrative is not a text primarily about homosexuality, but rather about violating strangers and non-residents in a community. From a cursory reading of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, it is plain that the men of Sodom who attempted to rape the angels disguised as travelers in Lot's house were offered Lot's own daughters in place of the guests—but of course, the daughters would not have been offered to exclusively “gay” men, if it was known that they would not be attracted to females at all. The translation of “sodomites” as equivalent to “gay” is a mistake. There is even evidence from other books of the Hebrew Bible that points to the “sin of Sodom” not being that the men sought same-sex relations, but that they sought to rape and thus achieve military dominance over the angels of God; the author of Ezekiel writes that the “guilt of Sodom” was having “pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease,” and that they “did not aid the poor and needy,” (16:49-50). Overall, it is not likely that Paul's audience would have interpreted *arsenokoitai* as equivalent to “men of Sodom” in the sense of same-sex erotic activity in the context of a vice list. As has been stated previously in this paper, the word “sodomite” never occurs in the Bible, in any language. Thus the idea of the “sin of Sodom” can be traced to Biblical texts, but “sodomy” and “sodomites” cannot. The word *arsenokoitai* has nothing to do with the Sodom story. The NRSV translation of *arsenokoitai* as “sodomites” has therefore been condemned as a tremendous error.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> On sexuality relating to power dynamics in the Roman Empire, see Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 242, 313-315.

<sup>50</sup> See especially William F. Petersen, “Can *Arsenokoitai* Be Translated By “Homosexuals? (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10).: *Vigilae Christianae* 40 (1986): 187-191.



Mark Jordan traces the history of the concept of “sodomy” and “sodomites” as sexual categories of action and identity in *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, where he locates the origin of the term in the works of the 11<sup>th</sup> century theologian Peter Damian.<sup>51</sup> In defining the sodomite, Damian drew on the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, and from the category of “against nature” in Romans 1. Damian defined the various types of sex acts that were possible between males, labeled these as a single sin under the umbrella term “sodomy,” and categorized those who performed such actions as “sodomites.”<sup>52</sup> Jordan writes in his other major work, *The Ethics of Sex*, that over the course of the later part of the Middle Ages and leading into the Protestant Reformation, theologians added to the category of “sodomite” the characteristic of those persons marked for destruction by God; these were sinners who performed abominable acts despite the knowledge that such acts would bring destruction on their entire community.<sup>53</sup> (The utility and misuse of Damian's theology of sodomites in 1980's right-wing Christian conservative politics will be addressed further on in this paper.) These additions, however, were penned several centuries after Paul's initial writings. There is no use of the term “sodomite” (or its Greek equivalent) in the original writings of Paul.

While *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are misunderstood as terms pertaining to homosexuality, or at least to certain forms of same-sex erotic activities, recent scholarship has come to suggest that the original intent in Paul's composition was not to draw attention to the same-sex aspect of such practices, but to the inherently exploitative nature of the cultural practices of pederasty, rape, and slavery, inasmuch as they were intertwined in Roman society in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. One cannot study *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* without also bringing *andropodistai* into the

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<sup>51</sup> See Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion*. (Oxford University Press: 2015), 31-32. See also Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*.

<sup>52</sup> Jordan, Mark. *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, 79-83.

<sup>53</sup> Jordan, Mark. *The Ethics of Sex*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 92.

conversation. One must inquire, however, where this leaves those scholars who further interrogate the nature of Paul's condemnations of slavery in his own time.<sup>54</sup> How does Pauline theology relate to America's own legacies of racial slavery? Historians of homosexuality must face such questions head-on if we are to combat racism in our discourse. The next section of this paper deals with Pauline theology as it applies to contemporary ethics.

### **Pauline Theology**

No study of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* can be executed separately, without taking Paul's broader theology into account. His epistles cover an unimaginably huge swath of ethical and theological ground. There is not sufficient room within the scope of this paper to adequately treat the full breadth of Paul's epistles. Yet, 1 Corinthians is not the only Pauline resource for anti-homosexual ideology; Romans 1:18-28 is another much-debated passage among scholars who seek Paul's stance on same-sex erotic activities. Not only activities, but the characteristic "nature" of persons who engage in same-sex erotic activities is considered at the beginning of Romans. Looking at Paul's construction of nature (*phusin*) in Romans has been one way scholars have tried to locate his stance on same-sex attraction as an orientation.

The epistle to the Romans is thought to have been directed at a mostly Gentile audience, contrary to 1 Corinthians, whose audience would have been a diverse community of Jesus-followers including former Gentiles as well as Hellenized Jews.<sup>55</sup> Paul constructs a highly Gentile-friendly cosmology at the outset of Romans that includes elements of the Genesis

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<sup>54</sup> Regrettably, there is not room within the scope of this paper to exegete Philemon, arguably Paul's most telling epistle on the subject of slavery. The focus of this paper is on those texts which have been prominently studied within New Testament scholarship with regards to homosexuality as such. In a fuller treatment of this topic, a reading of Philemon would well serve this conversation.

<sup>55</sup> Bernadette Broton, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 219.

creation narrative. He begins with an explication of creation, and how the truth of God is revealed through the nature of creation, but those who turn away from knowing God are those who “exchange the truth about God for a lie” and worship “the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25, NRSV). Paul suggests that wickedness comes from ignoring the truth about God revealed through creation and nature, and rejecting that nature in favor of artificial objects of worship, including other humans. He lists some of the actions that “those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (1:18) take in their rejecting of nature. “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural (*para phusin*),” (1:26) and “in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error,” (1:27). Paul concludes with a vice list similar to the kind seen in 1 Corinthians: “They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless,” (1:29-31).

Interestingly, the passage from Romans under consideration may not pertain to sex, and may not in fact be a condemnation at all. It is worth noting that Paul's explication of relations that are “unnatural” (*para phusin*) in Romans do not include the terms *arsenokoitai* or *malakoi* or any explicitly sexual vocabulary. Some scholars have used this to indicate that the passage is not related to sex at all; Gnuse and others have drawn a parallel between this instance of *para phusin* and that in Romans 11, in which Paul tells the Gentiles of Rome that they are like the branches of a wild olive shoot, having been cut and grafted onto a cultivated olive tree, which Paul uses as a metaphor for the Jewish tradition.<sup>56</sup> He tells the Gentiles not to boast for getting this special

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<sup>56</sup> Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 246.

cultivation treatment that goes “contrary to nature” – here, “contrary to nature” is a good thing, for it gives the Gentiles an advantage Paul tells them not to boast about.<sup>57</sup>

Other scholars have suggested that the sections of Romans on *para phusin* relations can be thought to have sexual connotations in a negative sense, but not necessarily in a negative sense related to same-sex activity. Bernadette Brooten, who has written extensively on this passage in her dedicated study *Love Between Women*, notes that Philo of Alexandria used the term *para phusin* when discussing relations between a man and a woman during her period, and he called those who have intercourse with barren women “enemies of nature.”<sup>58</sup> Others have suggested that *para phusin* refers to same-sex erotic activity, but only that which involves coercion and exploitation in the relationship of the two persons involved.<sup>59</sup> Dio Chrysostom exegeted this passage and took it to refer to those who sought prostitutes in connection with excessive alcohol use.<sup>60</sup>

Whether or not *para phusin* relations refers to same-sex erotic activity, it must be considered in the context of Paul's vice list which concludes the passage. Among the vices are harsh ones such as murder and the invention of evil, as well as fairly mundane ones like gossip, boasting, and envy. But each of them involves excess in relationships among the members of the community. To boast is to place oneself in a position of higher authority above the rest of one's community members; to gossip is to give oneself the moral high ground over the subject of discussion. What is “unnatural” in each of these vices, in other words, can be understood as those excessive acts that are perceived as being harmful to the divine balance of things.

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<sup>57</sup> See Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: the Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Convergent Books, 2014), 105-107.

<sup>58</sup> Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 246-7.

<sup>59</sup> Scroggs, *The New Testament on Homosexuality*, 59-60.

<sup>60</sup> Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*, 105.

## **Striking a Balance: Queer and Empire-Critical Theology**

Queer and empire-critical readings of Paul in recent years may have some key insights to offer here, with regards to Paul's theology being read as anti-imperialist. Davina Lopez has critiqued the discourse surrounding 1 Corinthians and Romans being read in ways which do not challenge an essential heterosexual-homosexual binary but which leave it in place in inquiring whether Paul was pro- or anti-gay (a fruitless search, Lopez writes). She advocates instead for utilizing a queer hermeneutic to read Paul's theology as embodying an active standing against imperial conquest and violent hegemony. The first step in situating such a hermeneutic is changing the dialogue currently surrounding the study of "homosexuality" in the ancient world to include formations of queer hermeneutics:

*"In such debates, homosexual and heterosexual are taken for granted as essential, ahistorical, and static identities within individuals and across cultures. But queer, rather than solely a descriptive term, a stand-in for "homosexual," or abbreviated way to say "lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender," is a challenge to the heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy... Queer hermeneutics moves from simple answers and prescriptions to complex questions and considerations... queer theoretical investigation aims to disrupt seemingly fixed paradigms of sexual orientation and gender formation."<sup>61</sup>*

Lopez argues for utilizing queer hermeneutics in the discipline of biblical exegesis in order to examine the systems of power and privilege at work in the Roman Empire at Paul's time, and for seeing Paul not as pro- or anti-gay, but as the "apostle to the defeated nations," who "unhinges the naturalness and inevitability of the Roman Empire" through "imagining a counter-discourse to the gender expression central to the creation of imperial power."<sup>62</sup> As a project, Lopez's work here closely resembles the ideal project of Emilie Townes in constructing counter-

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<sup>61</sup> Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 13-15. See also Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

hegemonic narrative histories. Paul's work, in this view, stands as a transformative stance against structural dominance and exploitation.

Similarly, Brigitte Kahl has offered an empire-critical reading of Pauline theology, which uses semiotics to illustrate how Paul configured the messianic figure of Christ as having a power capable of subverting the hierarchical systems of dominance and exploitation in the Roman Empire, through dissolution of binaries and conceptual fusion of self and other.<sup>63</sup> Kahl insists on the significance of Galatians 3:28 ("In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female") in Paul's corpus, and as a framework for the great binary-dissolving power of anti-imperialist theology. It is the "semantic backbone," she writes, in "part of a coded discourse among the enslaved nations about the spirituality and practice of liberation from the Roman 'yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1) through Christ."<sup>64</sup> This fits with the larger theme of 1 Corinthians—that of mitigating the vast inequities between rich and poor in the community at Corinth.

Paul, according to Dale Martin, sided with the poor and powerless in the interest of creating a unified and equitable community. Martin, the Yale professor of New Testament studies mentioned earlier in this paper in reference to his criticism of the "myth of textual agency" and anti-oppressive text-critical approach, has argued in favor of scholars reading 1 Corinthians as an instance of Paul grappling with extreme wealth inequality and exploitation in the early community of Jesus-followers at Corinth. In *The Corinthian Body*, Martin advocates reading 1 Corinthians as a work in which Paul addresses the ideological differences of the rich and the poor with regards to the body. Paul, he argues, sides with the majority of the population of Corinth—the "less-well-off" population—and "takes issue with the corporeal hierarchy of upper-

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<sup>63</sup> Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading With the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 24-25.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

class ideology, substituting in its place a topsy-turvy value system.”<sup>65</sup> Paul’s opposition to empire and his offering of an empire-subverting theology through his ministry among Jesus-followers is where the true power of the texts in 1 Corinthians and Romans, as well as in Galatians, lies.

Attempts at reading 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Romans 1:28 as being pro-gay or anti-gay are entirely missing the potential power of Paul’s letters to subvert such binaries as gay/straight which simply perpetuate hierarchical systems of exploitation they contain. Queer and empire-critical readings of Paul can be used to subvert these hierarchical systems, and, moreover, they can also be used to subvert the mis-informed readings of Paul that have come before in decades past.

Looking at 1 Corinthians and Romans through queer and empire-critical exegetical hermeneutics, it becomes clear that what Paul was condemning was not the consensual relationships between two persons of the same sex that characterize the kind of relationship we call homosexual, queer, gay, or lesbian in our current discourse; rather, in 1 Corinthians what was condemned in Paul’s vice list were sins of violence and excess that caused hurt to members of the community, and what was condemned in Romans as “contrary to nature” were those excessive sins which caused imbalances in power dynamics among members of the community. It is both inaccurate and anachronistic to say that Paul had a definitive stance against homosexuality in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. If Queer and empire-critical theology has anything to offer contemporary scholars today, it is that looking to Paul for any kind of exclusionary political stance is inherently futile. The next section of this paper will address the question of what, if anything, *can* be gained by inquiring as to what the “real” Paul truly intended in 1 Corinthians and Romans.

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<sup>65</sup> Martin, Dale, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), xvii.

## The “Real” Paul?

What Paul advocated for in his writings was a community driven by principles of justice, equality, and above all, love. Pauline anti-imperial theology sought to dissolve binaries and hierarchical systems of exploitation through a fusion of self and other in Christ. Biblical scholars need to look at Paul with an intersectional lens, so that we do not only look at his stance on “homosexuality” or any other aspect of life by itself, but take up constructions of power and hegemony in many aspects of life in the ancient Greek world as well as our own, so that we can center justice and love in our discourse. As Dale Martin writes:

*We will not find the answers merely by becoming better historians or exegetes. The test for whether an interpretation is Christian or not does not hang on whether it is historically accurate or exegetically nuanced... The only recourse in our radical contingency is to accept our contingency and look for guidance within the discourse that we occupy and that forms our very selves. The best place to find criteria for talking about ethics... will be in Christian discourse itself... By this light, any interpretation of Scripture that hurts people, oppresses people, or destroys people cannot be the right interpretation, no matter how traditional, historical, or exegetically respectable.<sup>66</sup>*

What Bailey set into motion was taken up by Boswell, Scroggs, Wright, Petersen, DeYoung and others in a vehement series of scholarly debates that lasted throughout roughly the same time span as the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis. New Testament discourse was not restricted to the academy, but became a matter of public concern; even the mainstream media picked up on the theological studies and debates of these scholars, and framed the pertinence of this discourse in terms of ongoing clashes between the gay community and Christian conservatives who opposed gay rights and research/treatment for HIV/AIDS.<sup>67</sup> The *New York Times* issued several headlines from the late-70s to the early-80s reporting on the debates

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<sup>66</sup> Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 49-50.

<sup>67</sup> See especially Kenneth Briggs, “Miami Homosexual Issue Dividing Clerics,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 1977, and Walter Goodman, “Faiths Rely on Scripture in Homosexuality Issue,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1984.



between progressive Christian theologians and conservatives on their interpretations of scripture.<sup>68</sup>

The conservative Christian political bloc would go on to continue citing scriptural passages they believed to be about homosexuality and sodomy as “abominations” and “God's wrath” in their campaigns against homosexual rights throughout the epidemic, despite increasing evidence that the biblical passages they relied on did not truly serve their purposes. Indeed, from studying Paul's use of language of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians, and his language of behavior that is “against nature” in Romans, one begins to form the impression that this language is not only about same-sex erotic activity, if it is even about that at all; rather, Paul is concerned in these passages with the dissolution of binaries and subversion of hierarchical exploitative relationships at work in the Roman Empire amongst early communities of Jesus-followers.<sup>69</sup> In fact, historians of Biblical Studies have located these terms in Roman discourse to refer to persons that were in sexual slavery or were coerced sex workers from the conquered nations to the east of the Roman empire.<sup>70</sup> That these subjugated people were, in our own terms, racialized slaves, and that Paul was condemning the institution of sexual slavery, is invisibilized in the translation of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* as “sodomites and fornicators,” and in the use of this text by contemporary conservatives to argue against the rights and protected well-being of LGBTQ persons in the U.S. today.

Very few of the scholars mentioned in the preceding sections of this paper effectively utilizes the binary-dissolving frameworks of Paul's anti-imperial theology. Very few of them, in Emilie Townes' words, challenge the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” that keeps the lagacies

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<sup>68</sup> See also Walter Goodman, “Faiths Rely on Scripture in Homosexuality Issue,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1984.

<sup>69</sup> See Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined*, and Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*.

<sup>70</sup> See Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 27-43.

of slavery alive in pervasive racist and homophobic structures that oppress persons of color and LGBTQ folk in intersecting ways. For example, there has been no body of scholarship to date, as far as I am aware, that examines how the early-1980's Biblical scholarship outlined in the preceding section of this paper played into Americans' fear of AIDS as “the gay disease” and simultaneously invisibilized the plight of African-Americans who faced perhaps even greater collective travails as a result of the epidemic,<sup>71</sup> and how such translation work is part of the pervasive legacies of racial slavery in the U.S. This and other questions will be the subjects of the third and final section of this paper.

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<sup>71</sup> See statistics in Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 126-129.

### **III. ON SODOMY, AIDS, AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT**

#### **“The Long Eighties”**

The year that John Boswell published *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 1980, was the year Ronald Reagan won the Presidential election, and the year that set the tone for the cementing-together of homosexuality, sodomy, and AIDS in American theology. The tragedy of the HIV/AIDS epidemic was precisely that it became labeled as a “gay disease,” and its consequences both within and beyond the gay community were compounded. Scientists focused on its transmission through gay sex (defined as “sodomy”), the media reported it as such, the gay community rallied in self-defense, and other populations—intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs, those receiving blood transfusions, and others—contracted the disease under the radar of the scientific and mainstream media eyes. While Biblical scholars were discussing Pauline proscriptions of homosexuality, those on the margins outside of the gay population continued to suffer invisibly from the devastations of HIV/AIDS.

Historian of the AIDS epidemic Randy Shilts in his groundbreaking work *And the Band Played On* documents the ways in which institutional failure allowed the epidemic to spread unchecked throughout the gay population from the late-70s into the 80s. This period has been dubbed “the long eighties” by historian of the AIDS epidemic Anthony Petro.<sup>72</sup> Due to the budget cuts of the Reagan administration and a Republican-controlled congress after the '80 election, in the interests of top-down spending (popularly dubbed “Reaganomics”), federal spending was funneled into neoliberal Defense Department resources, and public resources—especially those related to healthcare and medical research—were largely defunded. The philosophy was to leave healthcare spending to the local governments, and it especially appealed to conservative Christians with an individualistic outlook. If gays and lesbians were making choices with adverse

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<sup>72</sup> See Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 22.

effects on their health, according to this philosophy, it should be up to them alone to figure out the solution.<sup>73</sup>

Reagan also frequently targeted the “undeserving poor” for receiving egregious federal benefits, promising to unburden the American taxpayer from subsidizing such benefits, during his 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns. Reagan-era cutbacks evidently included a great many healthcare resources, which in turn affected response and treatment of HIV/AIDS patients (as will be described in greater detail further on in this paper). Dr. James Curran, one of the doctors on the foremost AIDS research team at the CDC (Center for Disease Control) in the 1980s, has written that “public health organizations were getting cut back when Reagan first came in.”<sup>74</sup> Reagan is also believed to have coined the term “welfare queen” to refer to the archetypal conservative idea of a woman living off the government by defrauding the federal bureaucratic system to receive undue welfare benefits for fictitious identities.<sup>75</sup> It is this construct that lies at the heart of Emilie Townes’ “fantastic hegemonic imagination,” that pseudo-historical narrative that casts types of people falsely as the villains of history. The next section of this paper deals with the ways this hegemony joined forces with the growing Religious Right in the 1980s.

### **The Rise of the Religious Right**

Starting in the early 1980s, fundamentalist Christians began a Bible-based anti-homosexual movement that took on nation-wide significance, where before there had been fairly little evangelical presence in the mainstream political arena.<sup>76</sup> The 1980s has been characterized

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<sup>73</sup> See Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On*, 291-295.

<sup>74</sup> Cathy Cohen, interview with James Curran, cited in *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 143.

<sup>75</sup> See Gene Demby, “The Truth Behind the Lies of the Original ‘Welfare Queen’,” National Public Radio, All Things Considered, December 20, 2013.

<sup>76</sup> See Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

among historians by the rise in religious fervor in the Republican Party in response to gains by women, racial minorities, and homosexuals in the form of civil rights in prior years. This evangelically-charged political conservatism enflamed public opinion through the burgeoning cable television media which broadcast televangelist icons such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who owed their mainstream popularity largely to Anita Bryant and her Save Our Children campaign. This section will cover the early years of that decade and examine how these figures rose in power and popularity during that period.

While it's true that prior to the late-1970s there had been laws prohibiting homosexuality and sodomy, these had gone largely unchallenged up until the rise of mass-media evangelism. Indeed, there had not been any nation-wide campaign for anti-homosexual legislation, because it was simply the default. Only after gains in public opinion on homosexuals following the Stonewall riots and other events, according to Fred Fejes in *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: the Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality*, when gays and lesbians began to win victories in the form of local protections in housing and employment, did large-scale anti-homosexual movements arise; Fejes asserts that the Save Our Children campaign was the first instance of a nation-wide grassroots anti-homosexual campaign in the U.S.<sup>77</sup> The Save Our Children campaign eventually grew from a local group to a national campaigning organization, the first of its kind in U.S. history.

The genesis of the Save Our Children campaign was the proposition of a law that would protect gays and lesbians employed as teachers in Dade County. This could have been a huge victory for Florida's gay and lesbian community, but the ordinance had to be approved by a vote of county leaders, and a local celebrity named Anita Bryant organized the campaign to stop the ordinance from passing. Even after the Save Our Children campaign rallied a record-high

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<sup>77</sup> Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, 4-5.

percentage of voters to the polls to defeat the referendum, the campaign did not stop, continuing to inspire groups to lobby against protections for homosexuals in Oregon, Minnesota, and Kansas, as well as the infamous Briggs Initiative in California.<sup>78</sup> It truly sparked a nation-wide anti-homosexual movement.

Prior to the late-1970's and the beginning of the Save Our Children campaign, there had actually been relatively little evangelical involvement in politics. According to Tina Fetner in *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*, hard-line Christian conservatives tended to consider political involvement as “sinful” and worldly, much to be avoided, and preferred to keep their own media, schools, and communities.<sup>79</sup> The *Christian Broadcasting Network* got its start in the 1960s and reached thousands of homes, but viewers kept their religious views separate from their voting ballots. Jimmy Carter was the first Presidential candidate in the U.S. to self-identify as a “born-again Christian,” broadcast media journalists had to do research on what “born-again” meant and provide explanations of it in their reporting, because they perceived it as being relatively unheard-of among the viewing public.<sup>80</sup> Once Anita Bryant, the face of family values and wholesome Florida orange juice, was on television singing and proclaiming the wrongness and destructiveness of homosexuals in schools, the mainstream media began to pick up on the rising tide of anti-homosexual Christian conservatism in the

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<sup>78</sup> For more on the national involvement of the Save Our Children campaign and movements, see Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*. See also Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> Tina Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Fejes, Fred. *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, 102.

United States. With Bryant's star power, televangelism – theretofore a “fringe” segment of broadcast media – took on mainstream popularity.<sup>81</sup>

Bryant often evoked “the Bible” in her speeches, songs, and writings—advocating for lifestyles based on “biblical values”—without citing particular scriptural passages or specifying which “values” she was referring to; however, she was known to make reference to 1 Corinthians and Romans as well as other specific passages on multiple occasions in her anti-gay speeches and performances. At one Save Our Children rally at a church in Willowdale, Canada in 1978, she sang Christian folk music and told inspiring stories from her life. At one point during her musical set, she started quoting from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, punctuated by sighs of “oh, oh,” what one journalist characterized as a “mix of show business and personal belief”: “neither fornicators, oh, oh; nor idolators, oh oh; nor adulterers; oh, oh; nor the effeminate; oh, oh; nor abusers of themselves with mankind; oh, oh; nor drunkards; oh, oh; nor revilers; oh, oh; nor extortioners; oh, oh; shall inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>82</sup> At a rally in West Virginia, she quoted from Leviticus 20, a passage about gays and lesbians being obligated to be put to death.<sup>83</sup> In her memoir, *The Anita Bryant Story*, she cherry-picked from scriptural verses when writing about different points of her life to illustrate her feelings when she was struggling, when she was

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<sup>81</sup> Anita Bryant herself is a particularly interesting historical figure in this period. A former beauty queen and singer with record sales in the millions, Bryant starred in commercials for brands like Coca-Cola and Tupperware, and was the poster girl for the Florida Citrus Commission which sold most of the orange juice sales in the state—essentially a large part of Florida's economy was sustained by Anita Bryant's clean wholesome Christian-centered image. Anita Bryant heard about the ordinance from her pastor, Reverend William Chapman, who told her that the ordinance would not only protect gay teachers but would “force parochial schools to hire practicing homosexuals,” parochial schools like the one Bryant's four children attended. After repeated meetings with Reverend Chapman and local civic and religious leaders, Bryant felt it was her duty to stop the ordinance from passing. Bryant absorbed a great deal of her views on homosexuality from Reverend Chapman, who hired speakers to visit their church and stoke fears of homosexuals amongst the parishioners by associating homosexuality with violence, rape, and child pornography. Bryant, terrified for her own children's safety, formed the Save Our Children campaign in 1977 to harness other parents' fears of homosexuals and rally votes against the protective ordinance in Dade County. For more on Anita Bryant and her pastor Reverend Chapman's theology and their leadership on the Save Our Children campaign, see Clendinen, *Out For Good*, 307-309, and Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 325-335, and Perry Young, *God's Bullies: Native Reflections on Preachers and Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982).

<sup>82</sup> Paul Palango, “Bryant's Show Business and Religion: 1,000 Listen in Church, 500 Protest Outside,” *The Globe and Mail* (January 16, 1978), retrieved December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 361.

happy, when she was faced with a dilemma, etc. She also evoked the Book of Romans in her memoir when explicating that homosexuality is a sin.<sup>84</sup>

When Anita Bryant and others quoted scripture in this way, it ran counter to the anti-imperial theology at the core of Paul's writings. When used to further alienate marginalized groups such as homosexuals, it is the exact opposite use from Paul's contemporary work as "apostle to the defeated nations," in Davina Lopez's words. What Bryant and others were missing is Paul's binary-dissolving anti-imperial theology, with the power of unifying marginalized groups against their oppressors. These texts began to be co-opted by Bryant, Falwell and others in positions of relative authority and dominance during the 1980's, illustrating how texts originally written to appeal to marginalized groups can be co-opted by hegemonic structures of hierarchical power.

This period marks the successful nation-wide unification of religious conservatives from a variety of different backgrounds. In January of 1978, a year after Save Our Children was formed, Bryant sang at the convention of the National Religious Broadcasters Association, with its more than 2,000 members in attendance, including Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell, among other influential figures at the time. This is emblematic of Anita Bryant's level of increasing influence during these crucial years. Falwell was already a relatively famous fundamentalist preacher within the hard-line evangelical community, but was relatively unknown to the mainstream media before this, and certainly not part of the anti-gay political movement before 1977; a cursory newspaper database search for the words "Jerry Falwell" and "gay" or "homosexual" turns up zero results earlier than a 1977 article covering one of Anita Bryant's press conferences, with her at the podium and Falwell in the background.<sup>85</sup> It is highly

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<sup>84</sup> Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977), 51.

<sup>85</sup> Roger Piantadosi, "Personalities," *The Washington Post*, September 6, 1977.



noteworthy that here appears to have been no mainstream newspaper coverage of any of Falwell's activities involving gays and lesbians until *after* he had gotten involved with Anita Bryant's organization.

Another figure who was already famous in his community but had not yet achieved super-mainstream notoriety by this time was Pat Robertson, a sort of talk-show preacher on the Christian Broadcasting Network's *The 700 Club*, who had been giving didactic moral lessons on family values and Christian living on TV since the mid-60s. He too owed his mainstream popularity in part to Anita Bryant. Another cursory newspaper database search, for the words “Pat Robertson” and “gay,” does not turn up any results earlier than a 1978 *New York Times* article about the National Religious Broadcasters Association conference—which Anita Bryant sang at. Mainstream media journalism had paid little attention to “fringe” Christian programming, until Bryant, a celebrity, became the figurehead for her local anti-gay-rights movement, when it became a nationally-recognized phenomenon.

National newspaper coverage from the period of the rising influence of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell indicates the rapid increase in both their mainstream visibility and their political influence. The *Washington Post* featured a lengthy profile of Jerry Falwell in April of 1979 entitled “The Evangelist and His Empire.”<sup>86</sup> By March of 1980 the same *Post* was quoting Pat Robertson as saying, “We have enough votes to run the country.”<sup>87</sup> In July of that year an article in the *New York Times* entitled “Conservatives Join on Social Concerns” reported on the increasing influence of Christian evangelism on the Republican Party platform.<sup>88</sup> Stories about these figures and their evangelism went on to dominate a large proportion of news coverage throughout the 1980s.

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<sup>86</sup> Megan Rosenfeld, “The Evangelist and His Empire,” *The Washington Post*, April 27, 1979.

<sup>87</sup> Garrett Epps, “Born-Again Politics is Still Waiting to Be,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1980.

<sup>88</sup> Leslie Bennett, “Conservatives Join on Social Concerns,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 1980.

The political flavor of the sweeping anti-gay movement was new in the United States at the time. It should be remembered that, after Jimmy Carter became president running with the Democratic Party as a Born-Again Christian, leaders of the *Christian Broadcasting Network* Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell approached him in 1978 to commit the Democratic Party to an anti-gay platform.<sup>89</sup> Carter declined to support Falwell's group, however, and declined to add the anti-gay platform to the Democratic agenda. The following election season, Falwell made an about-face and extended the same offer to Republican candidate Ronald Reagan, who could see the wind was blowing in the popular direction of Christian conservatism and accepted.<sup>90</sup> Thus, where evangelical involvement in politics had been approximately *nil* up until the late-1970s, the turn of the decade saw its first born-again presidential candidate and the rise of what is now known as the Religious Right as it has come to be associated with the Republican Party in the U.S. This movement owes its inception to the Save Our Children campaign, the first of its kind to unite Christian conservatives across the country as a unified anti-homosexual political bloc. And Ronald Reagan, the first Commander-in-Chief to align the Republican Party with the Religious Right, would be President of the United States for the majority of the 1980s, when the HIV/AIDS crisis would take its toll on gay communities across the country.

### **The Bible, Homophobia, and HIV/AIDS**

Over the course of the Reagan years, academic Biblical studies scholars as well as clerical leaders were divided in heated discourse over the role of homosexuality in the Bible. The writings of John Boswell, Robin Scroggs others have already been treated at length in preceding sections of this paper. The *New York Times* reported in 1977 a story entitled “Miami Homosexual

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<sup>89</sup> Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, 84-85.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Issue Dividing Clerics,” which cited several progressive Christian views on scripture verses that had been used by the Religious Right in anti-gay rhetoric.<sup>91</sup> John J. McNeill, a Jesuit priest and professor of Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, published his book *The Church and the Homosexual* that year concluding that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality, but rather that same-sex relationships should be measured by the same ethical standards as heterosexual relationships.<sup>92</sup> An article from the *Times* from 1984 stated, “The issue of homosexuality is troubling religious groups throughout America... They are under pressure from the outside to ease their traditional hostility and from within to revise their theology,” and outlined the positions of religious leaders on both sides including John McNeill and Virginia Mollenkott among the progressive voices.<sup>93</sup>

With public discourse on the Bible and homosexuality heating up, HIV/AIDS discourse began to focus on gays and lesbians almost exclusively—to the horrific detriment of other populations who suffered from the disease. During this decade of HIV/AIDS and “Reaganomics,” Biblical scholars were debating the definitions of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* and whether or not these terms actually referred to “homosexuals,” and the media was calling AIDS “gay cancer.”<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile, those who were under the radar continued to suffer invisibly from the devastation of HIV/AIDS. Thanks to Reaganomics, the centralized scientific research community (e.g. the Center for Disease Control or CDC) lacked sufficient funding for

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<sup>91</sup> Kenneth Briggs, “Miami Homosexual Issue Dividing Clerics,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 1977.

<sup>92</sup> John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1976).

<sup>93</sup> See especially Walter Goodman, “Faiths Rely on Scripture in Homosexuality Issue,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 1984.

<sup>94</sup> See Clendinen, *Out For Good*, 460-461.

HIV/AIDS research throughout the height of the epidemic. According to Dr. James Curran, one of the early leading researchers on HIV/AIDS, “there were cutbacks in public health organizations, major cutbacks in the CDC while AIDS was just starting to occur.”<sup>95</sup>

The CDC first reported what came to be known as AIDS in 1981, not by that name, but by reporting a series of deaths due to a never-before-seen symptom of what was thought to be pneumocystis carinii pneumonia among several patients who all happened to be gay.<sup>96</sup> When this was reported in the media, it took on a language of “strange gay cancer” because of its association with these patients.<sup>97</sup> Once the disease was identified as related to a deficiency in the immune system, it eventually came to be called Gay Related Immune Disease or GRID.<sup>98</sup> For the next several years, AIDS research took the form of a self-sustaining cycle. Medical researchers would conduct clinical trials at community-organized gay and lesbian health clinics such as those in New York and San Francisco, and through publishing such research these scientists perpetuated the idea that AIDS was a “gay disease,” which was repeated in mainstream media.<sup>99</sup> In reality, HIV/AIDS was spreading non-sexually amongst intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs and others, and sexually amongst both heterosexual and bisexual partners as well.

The early false labeling of HIV/AIDS as a “gay” disease enabled leaders from Religious Right organizations to add this to their armory of attacks against gay communities. Leaders on the Christian Right, having been recently unified and cast into the limelight through mass media coverage of ongoing campaigns against ordinances that would protect homosexuals in

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<sup>95</sup> Cathy Cohen, interview with James Curran, cited in *Boundaries of Blackness* 143.

<sup>96</sup> Shilts, *And The Band Played On*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> See Clendinen, *Out For Good*, 460-461.

<sup>98</sup> For more on early diagnoses of AIDS see Shilts, *And the Band Played On*.

<sup>99</sup> See the documentary film by David France, *How To Survive a Plague*, DVD, Public Square Films & IFC, 2012.

employment and housing, in turn added AIDS to their anti-gay campaign rhetoric. Pat Robertson, the cable televangelist, ran an unsuccessful but high-profile campaign for President in the 1988 election, with a campaign platform that included anti-homosexual policies and disenfranchising persons with HIV and AIDS. Jerry Falwell, the leader of the Moral Majority conservative Christian political group, termed AIDS “the gay plague,” saying it was God's punishment of homosexuals for their “perverted life style.”<sup>100</sup>

Not only that, Falwell promoted the idea that this judgment extended to the rest of society as well. “AIDS is a lethal judgment of God on America,” he wrote, “for endorsing this vulgar, perverted and reprobate lifestyle.”<sup>101</sup> Falwell insisted that AIDS was a form of God's punishment for the “abomination” of homosexuality, in the form of retributive justice of the kind set against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Similar rhetoric was used surrounding the Bubonic Plague that devastated London in 1665; it was seen at the time as a “visitation of God's hand”—not only against the victims of the epidemic, but upon humanity collectively.<sup>102</sup> The idea of collective guilt was taken up in Calvinist theology and developed in the U.S. by way of the Puritans in the early colonies.<sup>103</sup> It was not only homosexuals who were being punished by God with AIDS, according to the Moral Majority of the 1980's; the plague was a punishment inflicted upon all humanity.

This theological view of plagues inflicted upon entire collective societies as punishment for the sins of individuals within that society is traceable to early interpretations of the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis, as Jordan and others have argued. Anthony Petro, in his recent study *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* writes that scholars

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<sup>100</sup> Mary McGrory, “The Spread of Fear,” *The Washington Post*, September 17, 1985.

<sup>101</sup> Jerry Falwell, “AIDS: the Judgment of God,” *Liberty Report*, April 5, 1987.

<sup>102</sup> J.F.D. Shrewsbury, *A History of the Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>103</sup> For more on this see Stephen Baskerville, “Modern Collective Guilt Theory as Rooted in the English Revolution,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, December 1996.

of history and American Christianity should endeavor to understand such theologies of HIV/AIDS in terms of Americans' understanding of the category of sodomy.<sup>104</sup> Petro uses the idea of “moral citizenship” to describe the ways in which homosexuals and those with HIV/AIDS came to be equated, in terms of an identity perceived as anti-American and even non-citizens during the 1980s.<sup>105</sup> It is indeed the linking of the psychological category of homosexuality with the biblical category of sodomy which codified both homosexuality and AIDS in the legal categories of citizenship through continued legislation during the era of AIDS and New Testament scholarship that is the focus of this paper.

The extreme fallaciousness of the translation of *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* to mean “homosexuals” or “sodomites” in the NRSV has already been treated at length in this paper. The idea of the “sin of Sodom” can be traced to Biblical texts, but not “sodomy” or “sodomites”—these terms were developed in the medieval period.<sup>106</sup> The condemnations in Paul's language referred not to same-sex acts, but to acts of violence, exploitation, and slavery that were codified in structures of the Roman empire and which Paul wanted to prevent from being replicated in the communities of Jesus-followers. This original intent of Paul's gets lost in discussions of the Bible being “against homosexuality” in the discourse of the Religious Right, which cites scripture calling “sodomy” an “abomination.” But the fact was that “sodomy” was considered both a legal and a Biblical category at the time. An article in the *New York Times* from 1990 covering the release of the New Revised Standard Version praises the accuracy of the translation, and states that “sodomites” and “fornicators” is a “more literal and possibly less judgmental” translation of

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<sup>104</sup> Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 30.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>106</sup> Again, see Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*.

1 Corinthians.<sup>107</sup> Again, however, it should be remembered that associating the term *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians with “sodomy” is an inaccurate and anachronistic perception. Nevertheless, the mainstream acceptance of the NRSV translation would indicate that “sodomy” was widely considered to be a literal category, and a transhistorical one at that. A Halperin-informed interpretation would lead one to believe that the most widespread view embodied an essentialist (as opposed to social-constructivist) view of homosexuality and sodomy at the time; homosexuality and the act of “sodomy” was widely considered to be the same in modern times as it was in biblical times.

As has previously been discussed in this paper, Mark Jordan traced the history of the concept of “sodomy” and “sodomites” as sexual categories of action and identity (as opposed to those merely associated with Sodom in the New Testament), to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, nearly a millennia after the date of Paul's compositions. Jordan argued that over the course of the later part of the Middle Ages and leading into the Protestant Reformation, theologians added to the category of sodomy and identity-monaker of “sodomite” the characteristic of those persons marked for destruction by God; these were sinners who performed abominable acts despite the knowledge that such acts would bring destruction on their entire community, kingdom, or nation.<sup>108</sup> The sodomite became not just a sinner but a threat to the state; Jordan claims, thus, that in the Reformation the sodomite “became now more than ever a triple threat—an accusation of personal filthiness, of shared heresy, and of high treason.”<sup>109</sup> The Religious Right took up the language of the sodomite as the object of God's wrath in reproducing the idea of the AIDS epidemic as the infliction of God's judgment on homosexuals—and one which put the rest of

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<sup>107</sup> For an example of mainstream coverage of the NRSV translation, see Ari L. Goldman, “New Bible: 'Thee' Goes the Way of All Flesh,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1990.

<sup>108</sup> As summarized in Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 31.

<sup>109</sup> Jordan, *Ethics of Sex*, 92.

American society at risk of suffering too. It cannot of course be definitively proven that exegesis and translations of Paul thought to pertain to "homosexuals" and "sodomites" had a causal link to anti-gay theologies. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated that Jerry Falwell and other vitriolic Religious Right figures were engaged through the mainstream media in vigorous discourse that was informed by scholarly theological and exegetical interpretations of Biblical passages that were thought to relate to homosexuality at the time. It is this discourse which appears to have been cemented in public thought: that linking Biblical passages on homosexuality to concepts of abomination and divine retribution.

### **HIV/AIDS on the Margins**

The focus of the mainstream media and the scientific community on treating HIV/AIDS as a disease only affecting homosexuals had dire consequences for the victims of the epidemic whose susceptibility and mortality from HIV/AIDS went unseen, unreported, and untreated during the early years of the epidemic because of their marginal status. Cathy Cohen writes in *Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* that African-Americans in the early 1980s thought of AIDS as mainly a gay problem and a white problem, and sought to dissociate themselves from it—but that, meanwhile, HIV/AIDS may in fact have caused *higher* mortality rates in communities of color than in gay communities in the early years of the epidemic, unbeknownst to both the mainstream media and the medical community.

Instrumental in public association of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality was the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The first scientific publication to acknowledge what would come to be known as HIV/AIDS was written in June of 1981 by the CDC in its regular *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR). The report, sent to hospitals across the country, featured a short article noting cases of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) in five patients who were



homosexual men, suggesting “an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle or disease acquired through sexual conduct and pneumocystis pneumonia.”<sup>110</sup> The CDC would go on to focus its main tracking of the disease through scientific research targeting members of the gay community almost exclusively for the next three to four years, initially calling it “Gay Related Immune Disease” or GRID.<sup>111</sup> Cohen points out the fact that white males at the time had the most ready access to medical care—far more than most African Americans, gay or straight—and were thus quickly becoming the majority of subjects studied and treated for AIDS.<sup>112</sup>

While the Center for Disease Control focused its initial scientific research on the association between AIDS and homosexuality, studying primarily white gay men, the epidemic was spreading rapidly among other populations. Studies suggest that HIV had been present among the injection drug-using population beginning as early as 1975, and that the expansion in the supply of heroin and cocaine particularly in urban poor communities of color beginning in the late 1970s led to as high as a 50% rate of HIV incidence among drug users by 1982.<sup>113</sup> Cohen asserts that “racial differences in the conditions surrounding drug use put black and Latino/a drug users at greater risk for AIDS. For instance, the risk of being arrested for possession of hypodermic needles and syringes—clean “works” that could possibly save your life—is higher in black and Latino neighborhoods under greater police surveillance,” and that black and Latino/a drug users are likely to avert the risk of arrest by using “shooting galleries” in abandoned buildings where needles can be shared.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Center for Disease Control, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, June 5, 1981.

<sup>111</sup> Gerald M. Oppenheimer, “In the Eye of the Storm: The Epidemiological Construction of AIDS,” In *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, E. Fee and D.M. Fox, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>112</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 126-129.

<sup>113</sup> Don Des Jarlais, Samuel R. Friedman, and Jo L. Sotheran, “The First City: HIV Among Intravenous Drug Users in New York City,” in *AIDS: the Making of a Chronic Disease*, E. Fee and D.M. Fox, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 279-95.

<sup>114</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 127-128.

This illustration is not meant to assert a causal link between HIV/AIDS and being a person of color; what is intended by iterating Cohen's argument here is to illustrate the legacies of the focus of falsely associating HIV/AIDS exclusively with homosexuality for many of the early years of the epidemic. Further, it is not meant to be asserted here that the CDC was largely to blame for this. The CDC was largely underfunded at this time due to cutbacks from the Reagan administration. Cohen writes that, despite the commonly-ascribed narrative of the HIV/AIDS epidemic characterized by an intense “first wave” of HIV/AIDS which affected gay communities, followed by a less intense “second wave” that hit intravenous drug users after that, in fact history tells us it was quite the opposite. Later studies contradicting this hypothesis have actually shown that many of the early deaths from HIV/AIDS among drug users were uncounted—but that if they *had* been counted, “then the number of AIDS-related deaths among injection drug users would have *surpassed those among gay men* during the early phase of the epidemic,” (emphasis added).<sup>115</sup> Cohen puts it plainly: “Injection drug users, poor women, and disempowered children, many of whom were African American and Latino/a, found themselves silenced, invisible, and neglected in the early years of this epidemic. Moreover, their absence in an evolving picture of AIDS, I believe, significantly delayed and hindered recognition and response from organizations and individuals in black communities.”<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, the history of HIV/AIDS activism played out according to Cohen's hypothesis: these omissions in the dominant narratives of the epidemic hindered organizational involvement in groups outside the gay communities in combatting AIDS. Anthony Petro writes that several outreach organizations, including some progressive evangelical organizations, originally focused their ministries on reaching out to gay male populations, and only years later added heterosexual

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<sup>115</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 128.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

women, intravenous drug users, black and Latino communities in inclusion for care.<sup>117</sup> Of course, not all media attention is good attention. Cohen documents the deeply disturbing shift in media coverage, once it came to light that HIV/AIDS was spreading in black and Latino communities, towards identifying AIDS as having originated in Africa and linking the disease to sources in Zaire and Haiti through contact with monkeys.<sup>118</sup> An unsettling NBC report in 1985 linking AIDS to Africa stated, “Scientists don't know why. Unsanitary living conditions and sexual promiscuity could help to spread the disease.”<sup>119</sup> The causes of AIDS among African-Americans would continue to be linked to sexual transmission throughout the late-1980s. Marginalizing and racist myths about group behaviors and traits continue to persist in HIV/AIDS discourse today.<sup>120</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

In sum, the tragedy of conservative homophobia in the 1980s was this: that anti-homosexual usage of biblical texts was enflamed by HIV/AIDS discourse—while, at the same time, the effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on communities in poverty and communities of color were unreported for so long that the epidemic devastated these communities to a greater extent than it did gay communities. Progressive biblical scholars, as well as Christian Religious Right leaders, fed this focus on homosexuality in their studies of New Testament texts. They focused so much on homosexuality that they missed the big picture: anti-imperial, anti-exploitation theology. President Reagan's condemnations of “welfare queens” and “moral failures,” bolstered

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<sup>117</sup> Petro, *After the Wrath of God*, 40.

<sup>118</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 174-175.

<sup>119</sup> Keith Miller, news report for *NBC* television network, August 15, 1985. Cited in Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 174.

<sup>120</sup> Ted Kerr, “Breaking Into History: AIDS, the Archive, and the Fight Against the Canonization of an Ongoing Epidemic.” Queer Circuits Conference, at the New York Public Library Stephen A. Schwartzman Building, New York, NY, May 21, 2016.

by his supporters on the Religious Right, co-opted a version of Pauline ethics that supported empire rather than opposed it. Failure to acknowledge this deeply problematic history of Biblical literature is harmful for the contemporary LGBTQ community and for combatting the legacies of racism in the United States. There is a deep and urgent need for Biblical scholars and historians to heed the words of Emilie Townes and others calling for efforts toward a counterhegemonic history that overturns pervasive racist myths and invisibilized narratives that continue to marginalize oppressed groups based on perceived collective characteristics. Biblical scholars and those who utilize scriptural resources in their work must address the historic use of Pauline epistles in homophobic discourse. They must acknowledge that terms such as *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* referred to those who were vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitation through the social institutions of slavery and forced sex in the Roman Empire. Paul's anti-imperial theology is more authentically represented in practices that include the voices of the marginalized to ensure equitability. Only through re-describing history in this way can our discourse truly claim an orientation towards justice that combats hegemony and operates in the service of love.

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