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Religion, sex and politics: Scripting connections in Romans 1:18–32 and Wisdom 14:12–14

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Ancient people envisaged a strong link between what was deemed transgressive religious activities and objectionable sexual practices. Moreover, sexual behaviour considered aberrant was deemed to upset political boundaries which should protect civic and national stability, especially when this behaviour was suspected of effeminacy. Such thinking appears to inform both Romans 1:18–32 and Wisdom of Solomon 14:12–14. Focussing on two passages from these documents, the links between religion, sexual behaviour and politics in the context of the 1st-century Roman Empire are investigated, tracing underlying ideological intersections, connections and divergences.

Introducing the issue

The association between idolatry and fornication, between what is deemed objectionable or aberrant religious practices and alleged immoral sexual behaviour, is long-standing; in fact, some related links seem to endure into modern contexts.[1] Given connotations claimed between what in modern parlance may be understood as spiritual and moral-ethical elements, respectively – or to use the more established terms in the field of biblical studies, idolatry and sexual immorality – ancients often assumed links between religious practices and social or personal disposition and behaviour. Deviant sexual behaviour was denounced, but not merely (or primarily) in a moral sense; such behaviour was deemed to upset also political boundaries whose purpose was to protect civic and national stability. Aberrant sex destabilised the political environment, especially when in a patriarchal, or at least patrinormative, world, as such behaviour was cloaked in or hinted at effeminacy.

Given the links between what today would be called religion, sexual morality, politics and gender, divine figures or more pointedly religious and ritual practices associated with foreign divinities were not always appreciated and celebrated. Foreign religions at times were considered precarious for the well-being of a particular community or society into which such divinities or associated practices were introduced.[2] Such confluence of religious, ethical and political sentiments pervade two roughly contemporary documents, Paul's 1st-century CE letter to the Romans and the slightly earlier, probably mid-1st-century BCE Wisdom of Solomon. It follows, of course, that dealing with the constellation of thoughts that today would be considered religious, sexual and political, are vital for making sense of such texts – particularly when interpreters seek to explore their meaning, and often also their usefulness in discourses today.

The veracity of accusations of religious behaviour deemed irregular and sexual practices considered illicit, whether in particular or in general, or regarding the connections between them, are hardly at issue here; it is the construction of such associations and resultant implications that require our attention. The presupposed impropriety of certain religious activities, sexual practices and political actions, as much as the links between them, were often reciprocally established in argumentation in a sort of rhetorical vicious cycle. Our concern here is to briefly explore how sexual practices were invoked and used in arguing the case of religion in ancient times, and, how the interrelationships between religion and sex were seen to impact on politics, with reference to the Wisdom and Romans documents.

1. Already in the ancient context, different understandings of πορνεία prevailed, understood as illicit sexual activity among early Jesus followers and more narrowly as prostitution in the Hellenistic world (see Gaca 2003:20); such differences about illicit sex have not decreased in modern times.

2. Gaca (1999:168–195) argues that Paul in Romans 1:18–32, rather than invoking the standing view on the gods of others, and Greek and polytheistic religion in general, introduced a new, polemic understanding of foreign gods that would a few centuries later become the norm.

Note: Edited version of a paper ('Politics, Idols and Sex: Wisdom 14 and Rom 1') read at the ISBL meeting, 03-07 July 2016 in Seoul, South Korea. This paper is submitted in recognition for vast contributions made by Prof Yolanda Dreyer to theological scholarship generally and NT scholarship in particular, often exploring complex yet vital interrelationships between the not so obvious.

Idolatry and sexual immorality: Romans and Wisdom of Solomon

Both Wisdom and Romans are instances of protreptic discourse, composed by Second Temple Jewish authors who shared a monotheistic or henotheistic (in the case of Wisdom) outlook. The writings reflect a strong Jewish orientation, even if in the case of Romans, those from outside the Jewish community were apparently in focus (cf. Rom 2:1–16).[3] The apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon is dated anywhere from 220 BCE to 30 CE, but with a date after the Roman conquest of Alexandria (30 BCE) generally preferred.[4] Although valued differently among Jews and considered non-canonical in Jewish tradition, it has widely been appreciated for its intellectual value (e.g. Winston 1992:126). Much speculation surrounds its provenance and purpose, but is, as far as canonical texts are concerned, comparable in its unity of theme to Ecclesiastes rather than Proverbs, at times even considered a companion volume to the former. Wisdom of Solomon is typically divided into three sections: 1:1–6:21 on Wisdom's gift of immortality; 6:22–10:21 on the nature and power of wisdom and Solomon's quest in this regard and 11–19 on divine wisdom or justice in the Exodus. Two excursuses deal, respectively, with divine mercy (11:15–12:22) and idolatry (13–15) (Winston 1992:120). As hortatory text (*logos protreptikos*), Wisdom appeals to the natural world for evidence of God's omnipotence, and sees belief in God and faithfulness to the Torah as foundational for life and (in) its goodness. Notwithstanding the evil spirits' role in the world's wickedness, upon staying the course, God bestows immortality on deserving people.[5]

In Wisdom of Solomon 14, an explicit link is made between idolatry and sexual immorality, establishing a cause and effect relationship: [12]Ἀρχὴ γὰρ πορνείας ἐπίνοια εἰδώλων, εὕρεσις δὲ αὐτῶν φθορὰ ζωῆς. [13]οὔτε γὰρ ἦν ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς οὔτε εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἔσται, [14]κενοδοξίᾳ γὰρ ἀνθρώπων εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο σύντομον αὐτῶν τὸ τέλος ἐπενοήθη [[12]For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life;[13] for they did not exist from the beginning, nor will they last forever.[14] For through human vanity, they entered the world, and therefore their speedy end has been planned, NRSV]. Wisdom, but also Romans, made use of stereotypes for describing and criticising Gentiles who were ethnically and nationally different from the ancient Jews (cf. Marchal 2015:102). Even if somewhat more specific in terms of the accusation, Romans 1:18–32 made similar connections between idolatry and aberrant sexual practices.[6]

Addressing an audience comprised Gentiles and probably some Jews, the Romans letter argues that God has not given up on the Jews, and that the Torah is neither worthless nor reprehensible.[7] The letter encourages reconciliation and unity within the early Jesus-follower communities of Rome amidst troubling times, not least of which was the lingering impact of Claudius' expulsion of the Jews in 49 CE (e.g. Nanos 1996; Stowers 1994; White 1999). Romans 1:18–32 fits into the larger argument[8] of the letter which deals with a number of issues, but all of which are embedded in Paul's argument on God's impartial faithfulness towards all people, Jew and Gentile, and therefore the corresponding need for all to be obedient to God (cf. Nanos 1996:226). The broader Romans 1:18–3:20 is a polemical argument against society in the widest sense, accusing first Gentiles of idolatry and then also Jews of disobedience while the argument, ironically, follows contemporary conventions – significantly, Christ is mentioned only once (Rom 2:16) (see also Punt 2007; 2008).[9] In an elaborate description of idolatry, Paul scripted Gentiles as disproportionately fervent and gender troubled[10] who through succumbing to idolatry failed to appropriate divine knowledge (1:18–23, 25), which resulted in loss of control and erotic contact defined through unnatural 'use' (χρῆσις, 1:24,

3.Winston (1992:126; see De Silva 2000:1273) argues that in Wisdom of Solomon, 'the Greco-Roman doctrines of kingship, as indeed all the high philosophic ideals of Greek thought, are identified by the author with the teachings of Judaism'. As for the author Paul, as Jew he shared in associating Gentiles with sexual immorality, for example, Exodus 34:15–16; Deuteronomy 31:16; Judges 2:17; 8:27; 1 Chronicles 5:25; 2 Kings 9:22; Ezekial 6:9, 16:15, 20:30 (cf. Knust 2004:159).

4.Wisdom 14:16–20 is sometimes read as reference to the Ptolemies, but the Wisdom 14:17 which emphasises the remoteness of the rulers is taken by Winston (1992:122–123) as reference to the time and rule of Augustus.

5.Wisdom 13:7 critiques the power of visual stimulation through idols because it potentially leads to erroneous knowledge of God – see Isaiah 40:28 and later Acts 17:27 for motifs of seeking and finding God.

6.See also De Silva (2000): Paul's statement on the depravity of humanity on account of idolatry in Romans 1:19–32 shows strong signs of Wisdom's influence (Wis 13:1–9; 14:22–27). Both move through the same progression of thought: Gentiles ought to have been able to perceive the one God through observation of creation and so are 'without excuse' (Wis 13:1–9; Rom 1:19–20); Gentiles instead turned to the worship of created things (Wis 13:2, 7; Rom 1:22–23); this ignorance of God (Wis 14:22; Rom 1:21, 25) produced all manners of wickedness, including murder, theft, deceit and sexual perversion (Wis 14:22–27; Rom 1:24, 26–31); God's just sentence remains on those who practice such deeds (Wis 14:30–31; Rom 1:32) (p. 1274).
Elsewhere in the NT, idolatry and deviant sexuality are also connected, and ascribed to Gentiles: for example, Acts 15:19 διὸ ἐγὼ κρίνω μὴ παρενοχλεῖν τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν ἐθνῶν ἐπιστρέφουσιν ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν, [20]ἀλλὰ ἐπιστεῖλαι αὐτοῖς τοῦ ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος ([19]Therefore, my judgement is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, [20]but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood, RSV).

7.The reason for Paul's letter to the Romans is variously explained, but seeing it as a document intent on galvanising support for Paul's intended expansion of his missionary activities to the West, and simultaneously serving as a letter recommending Paul, is most convincing (cf. Johnson 1999).

8.The central argument of the letter has been variously structured to run to Chapter 6 or 8, or in some instances, Chapter 11 or even all the way to Chapter 15. See Johnson (1999) following Stowers regarding Romans as a diatribe, and sustained argument. More important, given the topic under discussion, is to note Paul's concern to avert an ethnocentric or 'Christian-*gentile* exclusivism' of Jews by early 'Christian' community in Rome (Nanos 1996:9–10); the early, negative portrayal of the Gentile world in Romans 1:18–32 is revealing. In fact, Romans 1:18–2:29 and 11:13–24 can be seen as the framing brackets of the argument that gentile Christians cannot boast in contrast to either the sinfulness of Gentiles or the disobedience of Jews vis-à-vis Jesus, as in both cases, it is only faith that has secured their own reversal (Nanos 1996:12 n26).

9.Strengthening the idea that the early Christian communities, in an attempt to maintain themselves in the Roman Empire, made sexual and conjugal relations to fit into the conventional patterns of the time (Van Wijk-Bos 2003:69). While homoerotic activities were not uncommon in the Roman Empire, the preference for stable married life was emphasised especially since Augustus – sexual profligacy was mostly restricted to the elite, or at best to those who had access to and the means for control over slaves and young boys. But even more importantly, as an anti-imperial Jew Paul is probably appealing to Stoic sentiments, which were at odds with emperor worship, as well (cf. Johnson 2006:289 n75).

10.Hellenistic-Jewish literature typically presented idolatry and sexual immorality as disgraces of the gentile world. Romans 1 may also exploit moral revulsion of Jesus followers in Rome about the sexual outrages of recent emperors: Tiberius' sex colony of slaves on Capri; Caligula's sexual predation and incest, rape of dinner guests and submitting himself to foreign prisoners; and Nero's reputation for rape, brothel-keeping, incest with his mother, and sexual submission to men and boys. For Paul, the imperial house may have been characteristic of conventional gentile morality: this otherwise exaggerated passage may in reference to the imperial house's sexual exploits be restrained (Elliott 1994:181–230; see Punt 2007:965–982).

26–27).[11] Making the sexual definition of the Others' overall perversity, the argument deliberately focuses on improper erotic and gender aberrant activities rather than merely including them as items in the ensuing vice list (1:29–31) (see Knust 2006; Marchal 2015:104). In short, for Paul, too, idolatry leads to fornication or inappropriate sexual conduct.

Although word studies approaches need to be complemented by the investigation of related concepts, Pauline concerns about improper sexual conduct are already evident from a basic word study. On the one hand, the use of the πορν-stem in the NT shows an interesting pattern hardly used in the gospels and Acts (Mt 5:32, 15:19, 19:9, 21:31, 7:21; Mk 7:21; Lk 15:31; Jn 8:41 and Ac 15:20, 29, 21:25), and the General Epistles (Jas 2:25; Jud 7) and Hebrews (11:31, 12:16, 13:4), which is well attested in the Pauline letters (1 Cor 5:1 (2X), 9, 10, 11, 6:9 (2X), 13, 15, 16, 18, 7:2, 10:8 (2X); 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; 1 Th 4:3; deutero-Paulines in Eph 5:3, 5; Col 3:5; 1 Tm 1:10), and prevalent in Revelation (Rev 2:14, 20, 21, 9:21, 14:8, 17:1, 2 (2X), 4, 5, 15, 16, 18:3 (2X), 9, 19:2, 21:8, 22:15). On the other hand, references to immorality range much wider than the use of πορν-stem words, of which Romans 1:18–32 is a good example. As Edwards (1993) demonstrates in her book, such concern with human depravity is in step with other literature from the Roman imperial times concerned with immorality:

> Upper-class Romans habitually accused one another of the most lurid sexual and sumptuary improprieties. Historians and moralists lamented the vices of their contemporaries and mourned for the virtues of a vanished age. Far from being empty commonplaces these assertions constituted a powerful discourse through which Romans negotiated conflicts and tensions in their social and political order. (Edwards 1993:inside flap)

Underlying these 1st-century concerns with sexual immorality seems to be the threefold connection between sex, idolatry and politics.

Religion and gender, and politics, in Antiquity

Our discussion is framed, of course, by the tension between the ancient past's complex yet interrelated society and the modern predilection to distinguish and separate categories such as religion, politics and sexuality. Not only are these separate notions acutely modern and also artificial for dealing with ancient times, but what we moderns attempt to describe by these categories typically overflows the boundaries imposed on the content material expressed through these categories.[12] Focussing here on a 1st century Roman perspective, religion and politics were related and both were engendered, not unlike other areas of life but explicitly so in the case of religion and politics. The Roman state was understood and portrayed as masculine, and true religion was expected to affirm its authority. Ergo, true religion similarly was expected to confirm a gendered moral order where men acted masculine and superior and women the opposite way, feminine and subordinate. False religion was in evidence both through its feminine nature but also through its feminising, which inverted established gender positions, threatened state authority and promoted military weakness.[13] False religion was deemed the partner of foolishness, insanity, chaos and all kinds or atrocities (Castelli 2013:295).

Not only religion, but morality itself was understood as predisposed towards masculinity, and also linked to politics (among others).[14] As much as religious and political categories often intersected in the 1st century, so too did moral and political categories. Again, to understand the ancient context, not only do we need to admit to the constructed nature of our categories such as religion, morality and politics; also, the modern filling out of such categories would have appeared strange to ancient folks. Roman authors often described as moral issues and related to people's (in)ability to exercise adequate control over themselves those matters which today may be seen as political or economic (Edwards 1993:4). Discourse was gendered, because Romans saw morality as situated in virtue which was described in what was seen as masculine qualities: noble, dry and hard. The opposite of virtue was pleasure, which was feminine and characteristic of slaves: wet and soft (*mollis*, *enervis*). The sources of pleasure were those public places often covertly and with notions of culpability associated with sensual indulgence. 'The ultimate fate of pleasure is not fame, but disgrace and death … virtue is presented as masculine, pleasure as feminine' (Edwards 1993:174).[15] The pressure to maintain a masculine image weighed heavily on religion, morality and politics alike.[16]

Sex and virtue were strongly related even if they were understood as two different entities. In Roman culture, virtue was publicly displayed in practice or behaviour towards others, while sex was principally an exclusive, private and mostly socially invisible practice (Langlands 2006:6). Virtue ruled out participation in prohibited sexual activity but also implied the requisite non-sexual behaviour in aspects such as clothing, movement and the use of space and language, through which also virtue was communicated. The nature of the Roman experience of sex and sexual morality then was

11.'Such a figuration, which is really also a kind of demonisation of these Others, echoes the other scare figures that circulated in Roman imperial ideologies *and* more recent colonial and neocolonial scenes' (Marchal 2015:103).

12.Categories such as religion, culture, politics and the like would have appeared unfamiliar at the time, and their conceptualisation as individual, separate categories unfamiliar and impossible (see Punt 2017).

13.'From the Roman imperial perspective, foreign peoples were like women, in a subordinate gendered position. Peoples from the Romans' East are seen as particularly soft and effeminate, so much so that it is commonplace to associate these elements (foreignness, the East, and effeminacy) as one rhetorical complex' (Marchal 2015:97; see Williams 2010:135–137).

14.As Langlands (2006:1) explains, not only does Latin not have a word for 'sexual' (only notions like *venus*, *amor*, *voluptas*), it also does not have a word for 'morality'. *Mores*, from which morality is derived, typically refers to behaviour and codes of behaviour, which is custom or convention in addition to more general ways of behaving, moral conduct or morality.

15.'Thus, the area of sexual morality provides us with a rare opportunity to examine the relationship between the public face of virtue in Roman society and the ethical development of the individual' (Langlands 2006:5).

16.Marchal's (2015) remark on the importance of gender, and defining men and masculinity in particular today, is also appropriate for the ancient context: The sexually exceptionalist imperial regime is the arbiter of proper and domesticatable differences, patrolling the lines that determine what is a disorderly kind of queer population (those who terrorise). Terrorist populations are depicted as failed men, deviant and perverted sexually and racially, but also religiously: their religious difference is marked as part of the reason for their perverse activities (p. 91).

provisional and unstable, and not to be reduced to a crude model of penetration and binary opposites – although it serves as valuable, heuristic starting point.[17] Roman morality was ultimately concerned with people's social location in networks of hierarchical social relations. The impregnability of the Roman 'full men' or *viri* concerned not merely the actual penetration of the body, since 'the contouring of the social boundary involved is the same when it is a matter of sexual propositions and pestering for sexual purposes more generally' (Walters 1997:17).

Within Roman society, various elements were considered important for regulating the social system, with *pudicitia* playing an instrumental role: it determined which individuals could be together or had to be separated, by establishing those contours and boundaries which underscored differences and distances between people, and by invoking categories such as Roman and foreign, free and slave, male and female, young and old, and plebeian and patrician. It was elitism that most often benefitted from *pudicitia*, even if at times it could be employed to express the most basic human freedom and dignity (Langlands 2006:365; also 7–8). Drawing on a wide range of Roman writings including history, oratory, love poetry and Valerius Maximus' work *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, Langlands argues that the notion of *pudicitia* [difficult to translate but something like 'sexual morality'] is central to understanding morality in the early Roman Empire.[18] *Pudicitia* was a controversial and uncomfortable notion but seems to underlie concerns with social relations in Roman culture including differences between men and women, the mind and body relationship and the ethics of power and status. The claims of those, including the emperor, who based their authority on their supposedly superior morality or sexual exceptionalism (Marchal 2015:87–115), are challenged when Wisdom and Romans' Roman outsiders are associated with sexual vice, originating from their religious practice (Knust 2004:159). These interrelated and criss-crossing lines between religious, sexual-moral and political constellations of relations in all their complexities appear to revolve around two particular dimensions of this constellation of ideas, namely sexual stereotyping and the political angle of the religion and sex interface.

Sexual slander as slutty stereotyping

The patriarchal nature of the 1st century is no longer seriously questioned, even if patriarchy should not be overexaggerated or envisaged in monolithic theoretical frameworks (cf. Meyers 2014:8–27). Patriarchal values fitted in well with the harsh, agonistic environment of the time, bolstered by values such as honour and shame – notions which, like patriarchy, should not be reduced to overtheorised and stagnant schemas. Even if historically both women and their voices were largely underplayed, the patriarchal ancient world did not obliterate them. For all the valuable contributions of Foucault in general, his depiction of Roman ethics as simply a 'male ethics' does not do justice to the broader picture. The portrayal of women in ancient Rome was on the one hand 'as the objects of moralising discourse', but at the same time even if not equally so, also as subjects[19] (Langlands 2006:7). Still, the 1st-century world largely depended on and inscribed male power and dominance, amidst wide-ranging pessimism and hopeless.[20] In conceptualising and referring to the other, the use of stereotyping and slander for foreigners was common (Malina & Neyrey 1996:169–174). Often, sexual slander in particular was used to express categories of social identity and to exercise control over the self as well as the other (see Frankfurter 2005:143). Stereotypical insults implying sexual deviance functioned in Roman society according to a broader framework which demanded moral behaviour of insiders. The notion of *pudicitia*, for example, lacks adequate, systematic definition, but its multidimensionality included elements such as its deification in some Roman sources, or appealing to it as core civic virtue, or seeing it as a psychological or physical state. It was invoked when shame and awareness of social boundaries entered the discussion, and was associated with another range of notions such as honour and bravery, reputation, patriotism, self-control and paternalistic authority over the sex lives of other people, with personal vulnerability, to name a few[21] (Langlands 2006:32). Accusations of effeminate behaviour were typical in such stereotyping which was intent on social border control.

In antiquity, effeminacy involved more than simply the notion of sexual role. As an important subset, effeminates indeed included men desiring to be penetrated sexually, but men were in other ways also characterised as effeminate (Gleason 1995:62–67). In fact, a complex scenario arises with regard to how masculinity and femininity featured in

17. In the words of Williams (1999:18), 'a self-respecting Roman man must always give the appearance of playing the insertive role in penetrative acts, and not the receptive role'.

18. *Pudicitia* is one of many Latin terms addressing sexual morality, rubbing shoulders with other words such as *castitas*, *sanctitas*, *abstinentia*, *continentia*, *verecundia* and *modestia*. Langlands (2006:2), focussing on the 2nd century BCE to the beginning of the 2nd century CE, reckons *pudicitia* deserves pride of place given the notion's focus on sexual behaviour; its prominence in political philosophy alongside other central notions such as justice, liberty, peace, dignity and temperance; its applicability to both men and women; its personification and cultic status; its controversial status; and, unlike many Roman moral concepts, without Greek equivalent (not denying its links to σωφροσύνη and αἰδος). The occurrence of *pudicitia* is interesting, appearing in Plautus' plays (especially in *Amphitryo*) but barely in Terence's comedies; in Propertius' elegiac poems but not in Tibullus' poetry; in Cicero's public invective but not in his private letters; in Juvenal's satires, but not in Horace or Virgil's poetry (Langlands 2006:4).

19. See also Halperin's (2002:21–54, espec 43) interaction with Foucault and his followers, criticising the tendency to perceive a history of ideas ('discursive analysis') as thorough historical study (historical assertions) of a matter such as sexuality, but applauding Foucault's resisting of a theory of sexuality ('critical antitheory') in ways bound to avoid the complacency of antitheoretical positions.

20. At times the irony is that presenting skewed portrayals of ancient family life is not only because of an unwillingness to recognise (the praise of) hegemonic constructions in the biblical texts. Sometimes, it is the very recognition and acknowledgement of the compromised nature of NT texts that prevents thorough appreciation of the nuances of the problem. D'Angelo (2003) argues about patriarchy: The explicit or implied assumption that patriarchal family structures meant an absence of familial affection and intimacy is even more problematic [than linguistic arguments that the 'Abba' address did not allow for intimacy]. Excluding intimacy and tenderness from the construction of the patriarchal family not only misrepresents the evidence from Roman, Jewish, and Greek antiquity, but also disguises the realities of patriarchal relations in the present: it is precisely from the bonds of intimacy, affection, and tenderness that patriarchal and even abusive family relations get their power' (p. 28). Patriarchy only in its most perverse forms and isolated instances entails distance, lack of affection and unkindness – which makes it easy to denounce. The trouble with patriarchy is, rather, its benevolent public face and the sincerity with which it conducts itself.

21. 'At times, aspects of *pudicitia* are in conflict with one another, and this complexity acknowledges the problems inherent in the phenomenon of a community attempting to establish invisible boundaries and exert control over an elusive and complicated area of an individual's life, and also the vibrant contradictions between various parts of Roman culture' (Langlands 2006:32).

Roman discourses. Acknowledgement that hetero-homosexual binaries are inappropriate for making sense of 1st century perceptions, and that genital practices were only one set of possible problematic behaviours which also included concerns about proper use of food and drink, for our purposes, one more differentiation is required: no exact correlation existed between insertive versus receptive sexual roles and suitable masculine versus unsatisfactory effeminate behaviour (Williams 2010:138). After all, masculinity in the 1st century was ambiguous with men at times ideologically portrayed as 'ascetic inseminators' and 'menstruating men' (Martin 2001:81–108).[22] In what Martin calls the conglomerate of Greco-Roman culture, masculinity was characterised by ambiguity and contradictions, both of which ironically ensured the efficiency of the ideological system of masculinity. Given that sex was 'permissible but precarious' in ancient times (Martin 2001:89), it was compromised as benchmark for masculinity. With sexual engagements as much as their avoidance serving (different) cultic and social purposes, attempts at exercising control were found over a wide range of social locations. Insofar as the ability to penetrate and impregnate was what constituted a man, so too did avoiding sexual intercourse define masculinity.[23] On the one hand, generation was a male prerogative, while at the same time, the avoidance or at least control over sexual intercourse was equally a manly trait[24] (see Punt 2016:3–4).

By employing the stereotypical charges that those not following Christ were wicked, licentious and greedy tyrants, incapable of exercising effective rule, Paul demonstrates in good Jewish tradition that he was critical of 'the world', but also how he depended on contemporary assumptions and rhetorical strategies used by that world, such as the link between idolatry and fornication and femininity's potential lethal social role (e.g. Knust 2004:164).[25] Stereotyping is not merely about deceitful portrayals in order to scapegoat discriminatory practices. 'It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and fantasmic knowledges' (Bhabha 1986:169).[26] Stereotyping is more than name-calling, but a complex ascription of identity underwritten by strategic concerns.

Paul and Wisdom made use of what was available in their own socio-rhetorical contexts. Although these documents stem from cultural minority groups, they show how marginal groups availed themselves of contemporary processes of identity construction, defining themselves through stereotyping of the Others. Wisdom relies upon the almost standard triad of atrocities namely human sacrifice, cannibalism and sexual perversion as far as the mysteries of outsiders (e.g. Greeks, Romans and Egyptians) are concerned (Harland 2009:184–185).[27] Paul's particular stereotypical tirade in Romans 1 also made use of the interweaving of religion and sex. Ambiguously, sentiments in Paul critical of Roman politics, economics and culture sit side by side with his reproduction of cultural presuppositions often used in support of the Roman Empire. Like Wisdom earlier, Paul also stereotyped those he saw as opponents, accusing them of idolatry-induced (excessive) feminine behaviour which violated natural sexual conduct ('use') and thereby posed a danger to society at large (e.g. Knust 2004:157).

Religion, sexuality and political boundaries

The Roman Empire frames both the Wisdom[28] and Romans documents, and is the focus of this contribution. Scholarly approaches and present-day political realities, however, have worked together to obscure the Roman context of earliest Christianity.[29] Accounting for Empire has often been relegated to perfunctory insistence on direct evidence of influence along the lines that literary dependence is argued. At another level, the NT's context has been voided of Roman imperial

22.Conway (2008:21–29) points to the ambiguity in the generativity and sexual restraint tension, and also in the portrayal of anger at times as feminine (loss of control) but at other times as masculinity (raising the body temperature).

23.On the one hand, for example, measures to prevent singers from engaging in sex by preventing erection through the insertion of a fibula in the foreskin (Celsus, *De medicina* 7.25.2; Martial, *Epigrams* 7.82.1; 11.75.8; 14.215.2; Juvenal, *Satires* 6.379; *Priapea* 77.17) were believed to preserve their high pitched voices as they were prevented from becoming men. On the other hand, various notions of the dangers of infatuation (cf. Columella, *On agriculture* 11.1.4; 12.4.3; 7.12.11 who lists sexual self-control as prerequisite for farm managers; prohibits sexual intercourse for those involved in preparing food and sees sexual intercourse as even weakening dogs' strength) and the numerous examples of antaphrodisiacs (animal parts such as hippopotamus forehead, Pliny, *Natural History* 27.42.65; 28.31.121; snails, pigeon dung drunk with oil and wine, fighting cocks' testicles, Pliny, *Natural History* 30.49.141–143; 30.53.148; 34.50.166) all attest to the extent to which intercourse was avoided by some (cf. Martin 2001:84–87).

24.As much as various ancient authors related the male-generative function to the power of male semen as opposed to the lack of or ineffectual semen of women (e.g. Galen, *On Semen* 1.7.5; Soranus *Gynecology* 1.9.34), they also believed that unlike women, males could exercise sexual control which was necessary for health reasons, either by avoiding intercourse (e.g. Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.7.30) or moderating sexual activity (e.g. Celsus *De medicina* 1.10.1; 1.9.2; Galen, *On Semen* 1.16.23). Motivations for and against sexual intercourse differed, as did the extent to which moderate activity would add or decrease physical capacity of men. What is clear though is: 'that sexual control and avoidance were concerns in a wide range of social locations … [*and*] ancient culture linked sexual indulgence to impurity or weakness and valued its avoidance or control' (cf. Martin 2001:83–97, espec 90).

25.Again, women are pushed forward in Romans 1:26, to be followed in 1:27 by a ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες, almost as if to suggest a repetition of what is found also in the Genesis account where a woman shows the way down the destructive path. On the other hand, the first-the-woman-then-the-man-order may also simply be indicative of the contemporary belief in the superior morality of men, enabling them to withstand moral-ethical challenges longer than women.

26.Bhabha's psychoanalytically informed claims about the indeterminate and explosive structure of the colonial stereotype are complemented by a growing critical awareness about the historically radical uses of Orientalism, both within the West and within the colonized non-West. Said's work (1994) remains important for the attribution of sexual perversity to the outsider and colonised people as an imperial rationale.

27.'[*O*]n occasion, Philo defines Judean associations by caricaturing the associations of others (Egyptians, Greeks) as dangerous, conspiratorial, drunken revels' (Harland 2009:184–185). In the case of Wisdom: [*i*]t is evident, however, that the ancient Egyptians and Canaanites merely served the author as symbols for the hated Alexandrians and Romans of his own day, upon whom he visited an apocalyptic vengeance in chap. 5 (Winston 1992:126).

28.Wisdom's primary focus is to encourage fellow Jews to appreciate their traditional faith. Insisting on the superiority of their way of life, embedded in the worship of the one true God, it overshadows their pagan neighbours' existence, since their idolatrous polytheism doomed them to immorality. Their perseverance for righteousness will be rewarded with immortality, vindicating their present sufferings. Roman rulers are primarily accused for forsaking the principles of divine justice and will pay the penalty for their anarchy. More than anyone else, the ruler must pursue wisdom (6:21, 24) as the Greek and Roman kingship tracts hold, without insisting on the rulers' divine nature and instead relating their lowly and mortal origins (7:1–5; 9:5) (Winston 1992:126).

29.Greco-Roman conflates: 'Hellenistic and Roman empires … to provide a seemingly stable "pagan" backdrop to the drama of Second Temple Judaism, the origins and spread of Christianity, and the rise of the rabbinic movement in Late Antiquity' (Reed & Dohrman 2013:4–5). The term 'Greco-Roman' tends to diminish if not disallows perceiving Empire, exemplified in the tendency of ancient Jewish and Christian authors to reserve contact with the Empire for engagements with Roman soldiers, tax collectors or tribunals, and that people otherwise contest Greek culture and knowledge but not Roman hegemony.

interest through cooperation between the ancient texts and their interpreters in the last two centuries (D'Angelo 2003:30). Neglect of the imperial context often means the loss of the Roman perspective, even if Jewish and incipient Christian perspectives differed in some respects.[30] Jews and Jesus followers stood aloof from the 1st century's broad pluralism, which saw Roman religion also in early Empire including and accommodating conquered foreigners' gods and convictions. Such accommodation allowed people to switch between competing if often interacting cults without jeopardising the authority of the civic rituals or emperor worship[31] (Elsner 1998:199). As for socio-sexual matters, while Jesus follower transgression impacted on absolute obedience to God, king or conscience, Roman people's fall from grace meant betrayal of 'the delicate balancing systems that had sustained them and suppressed violence for so many centuries within their culture' (Barton 2001:288). Albeit in different ways, concern about the gods and social relational frameworks informed and structured the lives of people in the early Roman imperial context.

Politically charged invectives such as Romans 1 and Wisdom 14 are not descriptive accounts but protreptic discourses, encouraging towards a new way of life using stereotyping to define Self and Other through alleged connections between idolatry and fornication. The value of investigating such discourses often depends on exploring their explicit and implicit assumptions and values. The modern image of a morally deprived Roman Empire and city of Rome in particular, derives from ancient accounts which are mostly critical rather than congratulatory. Accusations levelled at political leaders showed both a concern with morals, but typically also connected morality and socio-political stability and progress. As far as Roman moralists were concerned, specific political crises were often related to and even seen as the result of succumbing to the alluring attractions of extravagance and sexual escapades, which in this way endangered not only political leaders or the nation but also Roman public life as such (Edwards 1993:176). From a political perspective, the literary portrayals of tyrants are steeped in accusations of depravity. 'The goal, it seems, is to conjure as terrifying a spectre of lurid debauchery as is possible, a grotesque monster whose deviant ways portend social and political devastation' (Von Ehrenkrook 2011:145).

Part of the political rhetoric of Romans 1 and Wisdom 14 appears to invoke the decline of civilisation narratives (see Stowers 1994:85–100),[32] which fits in with moral concerns and their perceived relationship to politics. Martin (1995:333–339) holds that Paul's argument depended on a historical position that the decline of polytheistic peoples resulted from their disavowal of the knowledge of one deity of the past and of whom all people has had sufficient knowledge. Roman imperial politics provided the contours for the development of both incipient Christian and Jewish sexual politics, the socio-historical context of Romans 1 and Wisdom 14 (D'Angelo 2003:31). Femininity was a major concern for imperial politics, as is evident in portraying conquered and assimilated peoples and tribes as women's bodies according to dress, pose and features. The singular, racially specific bodies carry female names, Judaea, Galatia, Hispania, Britannia. For the Romans, ethnic others were characterised by femininity, unmanliness and hyper- or homosexual inclinations.[33] To protect civilisation from chaotic ruin associated with femininity, these peoples had to be subdued (Lopez 2005:95–96),[34] and the masculine nature of the state be safeguarded.

The elite male adult Roman citizen was expected to conduct himself appropriately in terms of gender and sexuality, and in this way, both determined as well as depended upon the imperial way of life. Proper gender-determined sexual behaviour for men implied the demonstration of virtue by exercising control, using appropriate receptacles, and upholding erotic conduct characterised by certain strictness amidst prodigious anxieties regarding sexual excess[35] (Richlin 1993:523–573; cf. Marchal 2015:96). In an ironic way, the closest of connections were made between effeminacy and sexual passivity and an uncontrolled desire for power, as flouting restrictions pertaining to what was considered natural boundaries regarding sexual activity was seen to reflect the desire to defy those political boundaries which safeguarded civic and national stability (Von Ehrenkrook 2011:162).[36] In other words, fornication through its association with femininity and lack of virtue, all of which was brought on by idolatry, posed a danger to political stability.

Conclusion

In the Roman world which largely defined the socio-historical context of Romans 1 and Wisdom 14, notions of appropriate religious expression and virtuous sexual behaviour were diverse and non-monolithic (e.g. Langlands 2006:13), and posed a problem for their altogether simplistic transfer to today: 'Roman categories rarely map straightforwardly onto modern ones' (Edwards 1993:4). Simplistic frameworks as

30.More generally '[s]tudying sexual ethics in ancient Rome therefore, embedded as they are in structures of power and status, politics, religion, rhetoric and other aspects of ancient Rome, will help us to understand better ancient Roman culture in general' (Langlands 2006:5).

31.The imperial cult, like other cults, was a euergetic system of honours; also honouring a distant ruler (Wisd Sol 14:15c; 14:17a; 14:17c; 18b; 20b).

32.'Paul's message cannot be easily mistaken as a movement to counter imperial normalisations and naturalisations. … One can only be folded into this (version of) communal life if one avoids the decline of civilisation narrated in 1:18–32' (Marchal 2015:103).

33.Josephus' work issues 'a familiar and timely warning: effeminizing tyranny is like a disease, invariably infecting the state with its passive inclinations' (Von Ehrenkrook 2011:162).

34.For connections between ethnic stereotyping and accusations of sexual transgression that produces the idolatrous 'heathen' as sexually deviant, see for example Bailey (1995:121–138) and Lopez (2005:92–106).

35.'Accusations of adultery led to the removal of several prominent individuals from Rome. Inconvenient aristocratic women could be disposed of with accusations of adultery and treason (Appuleia Varilla, Tac. *Ann.* 2.50; Claudia Pulchra, 4.52) or adultery and poisoning (Aemilia Lepida, 3.22)' (Edwards 1993:62).

36.Marchal (2015) similarly argues 'The colonising (mostly) male authority can claim his superiority, virtue, and civilisation by extolling sexual norms (of his own establishment) that the erotically savage or debased colonised people apparently do not embody. Their aberration proves the necessity, even the elevated benefit, of imperial-colonial forces. Their rule claims to bring order by incorporating these others into their imperial-colonial system. An ethics and politics of "hardness" is paired with the claim that other peoples were soft, strange, and even savage, sexually aberrant and uncontrolled – manifest signs of Roman superiority. These contrasts in bodily comportment coincide with racial/ethnic and religious differentiations' (p. 96).

well as 'historiographic trumps' (Marchal 2011:391)[37] are as detrimental for understanding the ancient Roman context, as assumptions that incipient Christianity did not borrow from their contemporaries or that the earliest Jesus followers necessarily held the moral high ground. During the first two centuries, the Jewish and developing Jesus follower groups that spread out over the ancient world from Rome to Asia, Africa and elsewhere valued a variety of traditions and the NT and contemporary texts already hint at how various groups of devotees would eventually make sense of Jesus in different ways (Pagels 1989:131). The rhetorical arguments as well as socio-historical settings of both Wisdom of Solomon and Romans entail connections between idolatry and fornication and politics that appear foreign in our modern context – but the connections are crucial to consider when these documents are enlisted today in support of theological arguments (see Punt 2007; 2008). Then again, ironically, in totally unintended ways and for unrelated reasons, comparing these texts and the connections they make between religion, sex and politics and popular perceptions today creates the impression of the more things change, the more they stay the same.[38] As Oleksy (2009:6, referring to Judith Butler) puts it: 'Who gets defined as "modern", and who does not, emerge as highly problematic, ideologically charged cultural processes, wherein sexuality and otherness become a major axis of intersection'.[39] As much as to this day, sex apparently remains crucial for strategies of othering, Wisdom 14 and Romans 1 are testimony to two further connections made with sex in ancient times, namely, politics and religion; ergo, dealing with connections made between religion, sex and politics on the 1st century is crucial for making sense of ancient texts today.

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37.'Historiographic trumps' in the sense of alternative readings of biblical texts that challenge conventionalist readings with simplistic appeals to history. Marchal (2011:390) claims that a text's 'contradictory instability and malleability for meaning-making is especially what makes it effective for facing constantly shifting conditions and still enforcing variously constituted norms', for which queer readings are valuable in challenging conformist readings through a close reading of the texts' rhetorical ambiguities (Marchal 2011:391). With reference to Romans 1, he adds: This deity's *orgē* is more like the *orexis* (passion) to which the apparently idolatrous, Gentile males have been handed by this God (in v. 27) and akin to the *epithymiai*, the excessive desires, which were the first punishing effect enacted by the divine on Paul's "them" (v. 24). Paul's version of this deity is more like the gender troubled and excessively impassioned Gentile figure Paul attempts to evoke than some would like to admit (Marchal 2011:391).

38.'Philosophy, by its nature, or at its best, is iconoclastic, in the sense of removing ideological masks or breaking idols' (Halbertal & Margalit 1992a:6).

39.Not only are texts like Romans still used to demonise some people, but new tendencies also abound. With reference to how sexuality and gender are used to script bodies in an imperial (USA) context: imperial forms of sexual exceptionalism offer dual and contrasting figurations 'the homonationalist liberal subject is only acceptable because s/he functions as an alibi for the alignment against the monster-terrorist-fags. Such dual figurations justify a dual move, then: incorporate some in order to quarantine others. Sexual exceptionalism explains which bodies to include and which to be eliminated' (Marchal 2015:90).

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