



Paul, St. (d. ca 66 C. E.)

by Eugene Rice

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An early depiction of St. Paul (ca 200-400 C.E.).

Almost everything we know about the Apostle Paul's life comes from the Book of Acts and from autobiographical details in his own epistles. He was born in Tarsus, capital of the province of Cilicia in Asia Minor. His birthdate is unknown; his birth name was Saul. He was a Jew and a Roman citizen. Like many Hellenized Jews, he later exchanged his Jewish name for a gentile one, in this case the Roman patrician name of *Paul[us]*. By trade, he was a tentmaker. He died around 66 C. E., according to tradition martyred at Rome in the Neronian persecution.

Paul had an excellent rabbinical education, partly in Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel. He spoke Aramaic and Greek, but wrote only in Greek. He once tossed off a line of Menander, star playwright of the New Comedy, which suggests at least a nodding acquaintance with pagan literature.

The pivotal experience of his life was his conversion to the "new way" of Jesus Christ, now glorified Lord, and his saving death and resurrection. (For the story, see Acts 9:1-19, 22:5-16, and 26:12-18). He devoted the rest of his life to the mission imposed by his new faith: preaching Christ the Lord to Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian.

Verses from two of Paul's epistles are important for gay men and lesbians. From the earliest days of the new religion, they shaped the attitudes of Christians to male and female homosexuality. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance and influence of these texts.

Romans 1:26-27

Writing in 58 C. E. to the Christians in Rome, Paul broadened the prohibitions of the Hebrew Bible to include same-sex acts of women. "For this cause [their unbelief], God gave them [the Gentiles] up to dishonorable passions: for not only did the women exchange natural intercourse for that which is against nature (*para phusin*), and likewise males, forsaking natural intercourse with women burned with lust for one another: males with males working shame, and receiving the punishment in themselves that their error deserved."

That Paul meant to condemn female homosexuality along with male is confirmed by the first Latin commentator, a still unidentified author writing about 370 and known as Ambrosiaster or Pseudo-Ambrose: "What Paul says explicitly about men, namely that males burn with desire for each other, makes clear the sin of the women. Woman pursues woman with filthy desire and lusts to use her in ways other than nature has commanded."

Paul's language will reverberate, directly or indirectly, in almost every later Christian reference to male and female same-sex eros.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

The second Pauline text about homosexuality mentions only males. At 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Paul lists a heterogeneous group of sinners whom he bars from the kingdom of God. The sexual offenders consist of fornicators, adulterers, and two kinds of men: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*--the nouns are plural and masculine.

The meanings of these Greek nouns have been the subject of lively debate, largely provoked by gay authors anxious to show that Paul and the early church had not intended to condemn homosexuality per se as harshly as has been traditionally supposed, but only a degraded type of pederasty associated with prostitution and child abuse.

Recent scholarship has shown conclusively that the traditional meanings assigned to these words stand. So do the traditional translations: the Latin translation "commonly used in the church," and therefore known as the Vulgate, and the English King James Version (KJV).

Malakoi

Malakoi (Latin Vulgate: *molles*) should have caused no problem. There is ample evidence that in sexual contexts, in both classical and post-classical times, *malakos* designated the receptive partner in a male same-sex act, a meaning decisively reconfirmed in late antiquity by the physician Caelius Aurelianus when he tells us that the Greeks call *malakoi* males whom the Latins call *molles* or *subacti*, males, that is, who play the receptive role in anal intercourse.

Paul's *malakoi*, we can say with certainty, are males--boys, youths, or adults--who have consented, either for money or for pleasure, for some perceived advantage or as an act of affectionate generosity, to be penetrated by men.

Arsenokoitai

The word is a verbal noun, and its earliest attestation is in this verse of Paul's. It is a compound of *arsen* = "male" and *koités* = "a man who lies with (or beds)." And so we have, describing Oedipus, *metrokoités*, "a man who lies with his mother," *doulokoités*, "a man who lies with maidservants or female slaves," *polykoités*, "a man who lies with many," and *onokoités*, "a man who lies with donkeys," said of Christians in a graffito from Carthage of about 195.

Arsenokoitai are therefore "men who lie with males," and the Vulgate's *masculorum concubitores* (where *masculorum* is an objective genitive), renders the Greek exactly to mean "men who lie with males," "men who sleep with males," "men who have sex with males."

The source of *arsenokoitai* is in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint (finished around 130 B. C. E. for the use of Greek-speaking Jews). The Septuagint of Leviticus 18:22 reads: *Kai meta arsenos ou koiméthés koitén gynaikeian*, and of Lev. 20:13, *Kai os an koiméthé meta arsenos koitén gynaikos . . .*; Englished we have, "With a male you shall not lie the bed/intercourse (*koité*) of a woman," and "Whoever lies with a male the *koité* of a woman, [both have done an abominable thing, they shall be put to death.]"

The dependence of Paul's *arsenokoitai* on the Levitical *arsenos koitén* demonstrates unequivocally its source and confirms his intended meaning. The word was almost certainly coined by Greek-speaking Jews. Understood in the context of what we know about role playing in most ancient same-sex relationships, *malakoi* are the receptive parties and *arsenokoitai* the inserters in male-male anal intercourse.

The bad news from the Christian Bible is that it condemns same-sex desire and same-sex acts without qualification of age, gender, role, status, consent, or membership in an ethnic community.

This may seem less drastic when we recall that Paul outlawed all sex except that between married couples and preferred celibacy to marriage for himself.

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About the Author

Eugene Rice, who died on August 4, 2008, was Shepherd Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His last book, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, was awarded prizes by the American Society of Church History, the American Catholic Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Historical Association. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, he instituted Columbia University's first "Seminar on Homosexualities" and served as an adviser to Columbia University Press for its series on gay and lesbian studies. At the time of his death, he was working on a history of Western homosexualities.

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