

Ambrosiaster's Interpretations of Romans 1:26-27

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Abstract

Scholarly discussions of patristic interpretations of Romans 1:26-27 have overlooked the fact that Ambrosiaster revised his reading of the passage. In the first version of his commentary on Romans, Ambrosiaster understands verse 26 to refer to "unnatural" sexual relations between women and men, whereas in the second and third versions he understands the verse to refer to "unnatural" sexual relations between women. The paper examines the differences between the three versions, explains Ambrosiaster's remarks, and situates his interpretation within the moral outlook and exegetical tradition of Latin Christian writers.

Keywords

Ambrosiaster, female homoeroticism, homosexuality, Romans 1:26-27

Over the past thirty years there has been a steady flow of scholarly writing on the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27, a passage where Paul discusses what he deems to be degenerate sexual relations. While the impetus for much of the writing derives from concerns about the valuation of homoeroticism in today's world, the debate about the meaning of Paul's remarks has entailed an interrogation of social, sexual, and gendered categories used in Graeco-Roman literature and twentieth-century scholarship. The publication of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance*

and Homosexuality in 1980 sparked a lively debate not only about the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27 but also about the categories Boswell used in his ground-breaking and controversial investigation of Graeco-Roman, patristic, and medieval evidence pertaining to homoerotic relations.¹ Most of the ensuing literature was interested in differing interpretations of Paul's argument or in debates about analytical categories used to describe homoerotic relations.² Some of the literature, however, treated patristic interpretations of Romans 1:26-27, contesting or critiquing Boswell's reading of the evidence.³

One of the patristic commentators mentioned in this literature is an anonymous author, now called Ambrosiaster, who wrote in Rome in the 370s and 380s.⁴ His commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans is the earliest extant Latin commentary on that letter, preceded only by the commentary of Marius Victorinus, now lost.⁵ Ambrosiaster's discussion of Romans 1:26-27 has

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¹ J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On reactions to Boswell's book and its continuing influence, see M. Kuefler, "The Boswell Thesis," in M. Kuefler (ed.), *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 1-31.

² For the literature on the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27, see B. J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Eroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 363-72. For discussions of categories used to describe homoeroticism, see, *inter alia*, Kuefler, "The Boswell Thesis," 9-13; Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 4-14; D. M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 15-53.

³ B. J. Brooten, "Patristic Interpretations of Romans 1:26," in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Historica-Theologica-Gnostica-Biblica* (StPatr 18.1; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985) 287-91; D. F. Wright, "Early Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality," in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Critica, Classica, Ascetica, Liturgica* (StPatr 18.2; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications; Leuven: Peeters, 1989) 329-34; W. L. Petersen, "On the Study of 'Homosexuality' in Patristic Sources," in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Critica, Classica, Orientalia, Ascetica, Liturgica* (StPatr 20; Leuven: Peeters, 1989) 283-88.

⁴ On the identity, oeuvre, and background of Ambrosiaster, see now E. Di Santo, *L'Apologetica dell'Ambrosiaster. Cristiani, pagani e giudei nella Roma tardoantica* (SEAug 112; Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2008) 21-44; M.-P. Bussières (ed.), *Ambrosiaster, Contre les païens et Sur le destin* (SC 512; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2007) 30-42; S. Lunn-Rockliffe, *Ambrosiaster's Political Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 11-62.

⁵ See F. Gori (ed.), *Marii Victorini opera pars posterior: opera exegetica* (CSEL 83/2; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1986) viii.

not been given considered attention. It has been noted in passing by a few scholars,⁶ but the difficulties it presents have not been addressed. In particular, the fact that the commentary exists in three recensions or versions,⁷ all of which appear to have been authored by Ambrosiaster,⁸ has been overlooked. While the oversight is understandable, given the preference one normally gives to the final version of a work, it is not insignificant. Ambrosiaster appears to have changed his

⁶ K. H. Schelkle, *Paulus: Lehrer der Väter. Die altkirchliche Auslegung von Römer 1-11* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1959) 64, sees in Ambrosiaster's comment on Roman 1:26 an allusion to the views of the Naasenes, a sect discussed by Hippolytus (see p. 00 below). Wright, "Early Christian Attitudes," 334 n. 15, includes Ambrosiaster's commentary on Romans 1:26-27 in a list of patristic sources that, in his view, "depict homosexual intercourse as in conflict with man's created nature" (p. 332). Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 356 n. 213, mentions that Ambrosiaster "takes Rom. 1:26 as referring to sexual relations between women."

⁷ On the three versions of the *Commentary on Romans*, see the introduction to the Vienna edition, H. J. Vogels (ed.), *Ambrosiastri qui dicitur commentarius in epistulas Paulinas* (CSEL 81/1; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1966) xxi-xlii. The Vienna edition refers to the versions as α , β , and γ , and presents them on facing pages, α and β on the left and γ on the right. Many of the variants are stylistic in nature: changes in word order, substitutions of vocabulary, changes in the case of a noun or the mood or tense of a verb. But a number of variants are substantive, consisting of additions to, modifications of, or deletions from the comment under consideration.

⁸ Vogels' view that all three versions of the *Commentary on Romans* come, successively, from Ambrosiaster was called into question in 1998 by Janet Fairweather in an unpublished paper entitled "Ambrosiaster: A Fourth-Century Commentator on Paul." Fairweather argued that there is reason to believe that all three of the so-called versions of the *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles* derive from a common archetype and that it should be possible to develop a single stemma for all the manuscript witnesses. In the *Commentary on Romans* Fairweather found that α and β had readings that were preferable to those in γ ; she suggested that the interpolations and changes in β and γ could be the work of a revisor or critic. While some revisions that now appear as additions in β or γ could conceivably have been introduced by Ambrosiaster as marginal notes or corrections to his copy of the commentary, Fairweather argued, others seem to have been introduced by a later author, since they disrupt the flow of the comment. In his recent English translation of Ambrosiaster's *Commentary on Romans* Gerald Bray, who made use of an unpublished draft translation of the commentary by Fairweather, has preferred the shorter version of the comments on the assumption that it is the oldest version, while at the same time adding later material that rounds out the meaning of the earlier material and omitting material that bears no relation to the text or that contradicts it; see G. L. Bray (trans. and ed.), *Ambrosiaster: Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009) xvi-xvii. My own investigation of the variants in the *Commentary on Romans*, which consisted of an examination of all variants in the first five chapters of the commentary, led me to conclude that Vogels' hypothesis is still valid. I presented the results of this investigation at the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies in 2007, and hope to publish a more complete discussion of my findings in future. In the meantime papers published by myself and Stephen Cooper and David Hunter have isolated changes in the three versions that correspond to theological and ecclesiastical developments in Ambrosiaster's day; see T. de Bruyn, "Ambrosiaster's Revisions of His *Commentary on Romans* and Roman Synodal Statements about the Holy Spirit," *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 56 (2010) 45-68, and S. A. Cooper and D. G. Hunter, "Ambrosiaster *redactor sui*: The Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles (Excluding Romans)," *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 56 (2010) 69-91. This does not rule out, however, the possibility that the manuscript tradition may have incorporated marginal comments or corrections from someone other than Ambrosiaster; see n. 28 below.

mind about the meaning of the passage, and the change is not a minor one, even for an author who by all indications was constantly revising his writings.

Before we turn to Ambrosiaster's comments on Romans 1:26-27, a few remarks are necessary about the text of the verses. Ambrosiaster based his comments on a Latin version of Paul's letters used in Rome, one of many versions prior to the Vulgate now collectively referred to as the *Vetus Latina*. Ambrosiaster did not have a command of Greek and did not consult Greek manuscripts of Paul's letters or Greek commentaries on the letters.⁹ His knowledge of Greek witnesses to the text of Paul's letters is based on hearsay,¹⁰ and when he hears of differences between his Latin version and Greek manuscripts, he prefers the former. Ambrosiaster is aware, for example, that at Romans 5:14 Greek manuscripts have "that death reigned even in those who did not sin after the manner of Adam's transgression"¹¹ while his version has "that death reigned in those who sinned after the manner of Adam's transgression."¹² But he argues that the Latin version, attested by such authorities as Tertullian, Victorinus (of Pettau),¹³ and Cyprian, is based on Greek manuscripts that antedated the Greek manuscripts circulating in the fourth century and is therefore more trustworthy than the latter.¹⁴ This preference for the Latin version of the New

⁹ See, e.g., A. Souter, *A Study of Ambrosiaster* (TS 7.4; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905) 197-200; H. J. Vogels, *Das Corpus Paulinum des Ambrosiaster* (BBB 13; Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1957) 15; Lunn-Rockliffe, *Ambrosiaster's Political Theology*, 39-40.

¹⁰ Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.* 5:14.4 (CSEL 81/1: 172-74): **βγ** *sic enim dicitur scriptum*; *In Rom.* 12:11.1b (CSEL 81/1: 404-5): **βγ** *in Graeco dicitur sic habere*.

¹¹ Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.* 5:14.4 (CSEL 81/1: 172-74): **α** *ac si in Graeco sic habeat etiam in eos regnasse mortem qui non peccaverunt in similitudine praevaricationis Adae*; **βγ** *ac si in Graeco non ita cautum dicatur—sic enim dicitur scriptum etiam in eos regnasse mortem qui non peccaverunt in similitudinem praevaricationis Adae*. Cf. B. and K. Aland et al. (eds.), *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th corr. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), apparatus at Rom. 5:14.

¹² Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.* 5:14.1 (CSEL 81/1: 170-72): *in eos qui peccaverunt in similitudine(m) praevaricationis Adae*.

¹³ See now S. A. Cooper, *Marius Victorinus' Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 188-90.

¹⁴ Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.* 5:14.4.e-5 (CSEL 81/1: 176-77).

Testament made Ambrosiaster the butt of Jerome's sarcasm in *Letter 27*,¹⁵ where Jerome derides critics of his revision of the Latin version of the gospels in light of the Greek manuscripts.¹⁶ Ambrosiaster's defence of the Latin version at Romans 5:14, as well as Romans 12:11,¹⁷ is certainly a response to Jerome.

When patristic commentaries on the Bible were copied by later scribes, the biblical text, if presented verse by verse or section by section prior to a comment, was often influenced by or substituted with the biblical text known to the scribe. The biblical text found in a given manuscript tradition of a commentary may, therefore, not have been the biblical text used by its author. Modern editors are obliged to ascertain the probable biblical text of the author by weighing the various witnesses and adducing evidence from the author's comments. The presentation of the text used by Ambrosiaster in the Vienna edition of his *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles* is, unfortunately, marred by systematic deficiencies and occasional errors due in part to the protracted preparation of the edition, which involved successive editors.¹⁸ For Ambrosiaster's text of the Pauline letters from 1 Corinthians to Philemon one must refer not to the Vienna edition but to Heinrich Vogels' earlier study of Ambrosiaster's biblical text.¹⁹ However, in the case of Romans 1:26-27, the two do not differ; both have *propterea tradidit illos deus in passiones ignominiae. nam feminae eorum immutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam. similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desiderium sui invicem masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes, et compensationem mercedis quam oportet erroris sui in*

¹⁵ H. J. Vogels, "Ambrosiaster und Hieronymus," *Revue Bénédictine* 66 (1954) 14–19.

¹⁶ Jerome, *Ep. 27.3* (CSEL 54²: 225-26).

¹⁷ Ambrosiaster, *In Rom. 12:11.1b* (CSEL 81/1: 404)

¹⁸ H. J. Frede (ed.), *Epistulae ad Thessalonicenses, Timotheum* (VL 25.1; Freiburg: Herder, 1976-1982) 136-40; U. Fröhlich (ed.), *Epistula ad Corinthios 1* (VL 22; Freiburg: Herder, 1995-) 199-202.

¹⁹ Vogels, *Das Corpus Paulinum*.

semetipsos recipientes. This version of Romans 1:26-27, which belongs to the Italian family of Latin translations of the Bible prior to the Vulgate,²⁰ differs slightly from that found in Rufinus' translation of Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, the anonymous commentary on Romans preserved in a Budapest manuscript, and Pelagius' *Commentary on Romans*, all composed around the turn of the fifth century.²¹ It is closest to the text of Pelagius, who, like Ambrosiaster, wrote his commentary in Rome, whereas the Pauline text found in Rufinus' translation and the anonymous commentary is of Aquileian provenance.²² More importantly, the variants found in Ambrosiaster's text of Romans 1:26-27 are supported by the phraseology of the comments that follow.²³ Thus we may be confident that the text of the lemmata was the text on which Ambrosiaster commented.

Ambrosiaster's earliest comment on Romans 1:26 is relatively brief (see **α** in the appendix). Ambrosiaster understands Paul to say that, as an example of the base desires to which people were

²⁰ Fröhlich, *Epistula ad Corinthios*, 197-99.

²¹ See C. P. Hammond Bammel, *Der Römerbrieftext des Rufin und seine Origenes-Übersetzung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1985) 507: *...qui extra naturam est...accensi sunt in desiderium sui in invicem...mercedem quam oportuit...in semetipsis*; H. J. Frede, *Ein neuer Paulustext und Kommentar*, vol. 2, *Die Texte* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 26: *...in passiones contumeliae...accensi sunt in desiderio suo...mercedem quam oportuit...in semetipsis*; T. S. de Bruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; rpt. 2002) 169: *...in desideriiis suis...et mercedem quam oportuit*.

²² The lemmata found in Rufinus' translation of Origen's *Commentary on Romans* are derived not from Origen's work but from Rufinus' Latin text of Romans. This text was of Aquileian provenance, but was revised by Rufinus over time in light of readings found in Greek manuscripts attesting a "non-Western" text of Romans. See Bammel, *Der Römerbrieftext des Rufin*, 140-63, esp. 144-46. Similarities between the text of Romans in the Budapest manuscript and the lemmata in Rufinus' translation suggest that an Aquileian text of Romans was substituted for the text used by the anonymous commentator. See H. J. Frede, *Ein neuer Paulustext und Kommentar*, vol. 1, *Untersuchungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1973) 257; Bammel, *Der Römerbrieftext des Rufin*, 148-49.

²³ Cf. *immutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam* in the lemma at verse 26b with *quid est enim immutare naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam* in the comment in **β** and **γ** (CSEL 81/1: 50.2-4, 8-9; 51.2-5, 7-8); *exarserunt in desiderium sui invicem* in the lemma at verse 27a with *quando autem subiecit: similiter et masculi, dicens, exarserunt in desiderium sui* in the comment in **β** (CSEL 81/1: 50.18-19, 21-22) and *quando autem subiecit dicens: similiter autem et masculi exarserunt invicem in desiderium sui* in the comment in **γ** (CSEL 81/1: 51.17-18, 20-22); *et compensationem mercedis quam oportet* at verse 27c with *hanc dicit compensationem esse contempti dei* in the comment in **α**, **β**, and **γ** (CSEL 81/1: 52.4-6, 53.6-8).

given over on account of idolatry,²⁴ women offered themselves to men in ways that were not acceptable: “He bears witness that these things befell the human race because God was angered by idolatry: females would offer themselves to men in ways other than nature prescribed.” In the Graeco-Roman world, as in other periods, cultural norms surrounding human activity were represented simply as “natural” and transgression of those norms was represented as being “contrary to nature.”²⁵ In his earliest comment on Romans 1:26, therefore, Ambrosiaster takes Paul to refer to sexual relations between a woman and a man where the sexual roles recognized in his culture are not observed. In all likelihood Ambrosiaster is referring to non-procreative sex between women and men, probably anal intercourse, possibly also oral sex.

In the next version of the comment (see **β** in the appendix), Ambrosiaster takes Romans 1:26 to refer to homoerotic relations between women. The beginning of the first sentence is unchanged: “He bears witness that these things befell the human race because God was angered by idolatry.” But the remainder is revised: “a woman would seek to have intercourse with a woman out of base lust.”²⁶ Ambrosiaster continues with a surprising remark about other interpretations of the verse, given the prior version of the comment in **α**: “Some explain this differently because they do not perceive clearly the import of the words.” Then Ambrosiaster explains why the verse should be interpreted as he construes it. He argues, as I read him, that Paul must have meant that women turned from vaginal intercourse with men to vaginal intercourse with women: “What in fact does it mean to exchange ‘natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature,’ if not to

²⁴ Cf. Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.* 1:24.1 (CSEL 81/1: 46).

²⁵ See C. A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 231-44.

²⁶ Ambrosiaster uses *mulieres* to refer to women here, whereas in **α** and **γ** he uses *feminae*. The variation does not appear to be significant, since in his comment on verse 27 Ambrosiaster uses *mulieres* in both **β** and **γ**. The reversion to *femina* in the first sentence of the comment on verse 26 in **γ** (*femina feminam*) was likely occasioned by the proximity of the lemma, which in Ambrosiaster’s Latin version has *feminae*. Cf. n. 61 below.

engage in another form of intercourse once the permissible form of intercourse has been done away with, so that one and the same part of the body offers itself to a form of intercourse other than the permissible form? For if that part of the body (i.e., the anus) is meant, how did they exchange the intercourse of nature, since that part of the body does not have such a use given by nature?" To support this interpretation, Ambrosiaster appeals to verse 27. Paul, he says, "has now made plain how what he said above about the women should be understood," since the verse states that men likewise forsook natural intercourse with women and were consumed with desire for one another: "When he added: 'And likewise the males, too, were consumed with desire for one another,' he disclosed the manifest sin of the women. In short, he charges the women with each other, and the men likewise."²⁷ Both verses, Ambrosiaster now concludes, refer to same-sex relations.

Ambrosiaster saw fit to elaborate further in the third version of his comment on verse 27 (see γ in the appendix). He explains first why Paul used the word "exchange" (*immutare*) when discussing the practice of women, but used the word "forsake" (*relinquere*) when discussing the practice of men: "In short, he did not say that the men exchanged natural intercourse with one another, because such intercourse is not permitted for this part (i.e., the anus)." Ambrosiaster's argument seems to be that, since the anus is not intended for sexual relations whereas the vagina is, women who have vaginal sexual relations with women can be said to have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural intercourse, whereas men who have anal intercourse with men are described as having abandoned natural intercourse. Ambrosiaster then adds a cryptic observation about homoerotic relations in his own day: "When even today one may come upon such women, is it surprising that just as that intercourse (i.e., anal intercourse) is devised by men, so too this

²⁷ Bray's translation of Ambrosiaster's comments on Romans 1:26-27 follows the text of β . However, it omits the additional remarks that immediately follow verse 27 in β , which I have just quoted (*nunc manifestavit... viros similiter*). These remarks are retained, with minor variants, in γ . The omission is puzzling, given that the additional remarks reinforce Ambrosiaster's interpretation of verse 26 in β .

intercourse (i.e., vaginal intercourse) is devised by women?” This remark attests to the presence in mid-fourth-century Rome of women reputed to have homoerotic relations. It also suggests that Ambrosiaster felt a need to explain sexual relations between women. The remainder of the comment on verse 27 in γ is substantially the same as in β , except that the last sentence in sections 1 and 2 of the comment according to Vogels’ arrangement is attested only by two manuscripts.²⁸

Several aspects of these successive versions of the comments on Romans 1:26-27 are intriguing. We begin with the notion, voiced in Ambrosiaster’s interpretation of verse 26 in α , that some forms of sexual intercourse between women and men are “contrary to nature.” Evidence that non-procreative heterosexual sex, particularly anal intercourse, was regarded as being “contrary to nature” in Graeco-Roman moral discourse is scarce.²⁹ Roman satirists, for instance, present anal intercourse as a form of sex that married men will pursue with their wives or, if their wives resist, with boys.³⁰ However, in the early empire some philosophical writers, both non-Christian and Christian, held that married men should have sex with their wives only for the purpose of procreation.³¹ This would preclude, obviously, oral or anal sex. Moreover, by the fourth century

²⁸ The comment on verse 27 is arranged in three sections: 1a (found only in β and γ), 1, and 2. In sections 1 and 2 the last sentence, found in α and β , is attested in γ by only a few manuscripts. The sentence *quoniam enim aliam legem dare non potest satanas—nihil enim habet concessa et licita—, in alium ordinem versat, ut dum aliter fiunt quam concessa sunt, sint peccatum* is attested only by A = Amiens, Bibliothèque Municipale 87, and a second hand in G = St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek 101 (CSEL 81/1: 53.2-5). The sentence *quantum enim idolatria perimpium et gravissimum delictum est, tantum et compensatio eius horrenda et persordida passio est* is attested only by D = Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale lat. 1759 (CSEL 81/1: 53.11-13); this manuscript also does not attest to an addition to the previous sentence, *quod et diabolus decepit et hominem morti fecit obnoxium* (CSEL 81/1: 53.10-11). Interestingly, these manuscripts are also the only witnesses to several phrases in the comment on verse 26 in γ . The second hand in G is the only witness to *unusquisque inter se invicem sexus*, and A and D are the only witnesses to *quam putant* (CSEL 81/1: 51.9-10, 11-12). This illustrates the complexity of the manuscript traditions of Ambrosiaster’s commentary, and the difficulty of establishing a text of the versions. I take the additional phrases introduced into the comment on verse 26 to be marginal comments of a reader that were later incorporated into the manuscript tradition. But then should one regard the two sentences in the comment on verse 27 to be interpolations intended to harmonize the text of γ with the text of α and/or β ?

²⁹ See Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 248 n. 99.

³⁰ See Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 50-51.

³¹ Philo, *De spec. leg.* 3.20.113 (LCL 7: 546-47); Musonius Rufus 12.86.4-8 (O. Hense [ed.], *C. Musonii Rufi reliquiae* [Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1905] 63-64); Athenagoras, *Leg.* 33.1-2 (SC 379: 196-98); Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.*

there was a tendency to hold men to a stricter code of sexual propriety, reducing freedoms previously allowed them but denied women. This code, articulated in both non-Christian and Christian discourse, required married men to refrain from sexual relations, particularly penetrative acts, with women other than their wives, with slaves and prostitutes of both sexes, and with adolescent boys.³² It may be that Ambrosiaster's stance in α was an expression of this ethos, since Ambrosiaster appears to have been a traditionalist on the subject of marriage and sexuality.³³

In fact, we can be more precise. Lactantius and Augustine, writing at the beginning of the fourth and fifth centuries respectively, offer convenient points of comparison with Ambrosiaster. In a discussion of the sense of touch in the *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius explains that sexual relations between men and women are intended for procreation and should take place only within marriage.³⁴ When he states that “we have received the part of the body called the genitals, as its very name teaches, for no other reason than the production of offspring,”³⁵ he implicitly excludes oral and anal sex. He does not refer explicitly to non-procreative sexual acts between women and men, nor does he characterize them as “contrary to nature,” though he probably regarded them as such. (A few paragraphs earlier Lactantius emphatically condemns sexual relations between males,

2.10.91, 2.10.95 (SC 108: 176-77, 182-85); *Str.* 3.7.58, 3.11.71 (GCS 52: 222-23, 228). This stance was not widely held at the time; cf. A. C. van Geytenbeek, *Musonius Rufus and Greek Diatribe*, trans. B. L. Hijmans (Assen: van Gorcum, 1963) 71-77.

³² M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 81-96, 164-68.

³³ P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 377-78; D. G. Hunter, “On the Sin of Adam and Eve: A Little-Known Defense of Marriage and Childbearing by Ambrosiaster,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989) 283-99.

³⁴ Lactantius, *Inst.* 6.23.2, 15, 17 (CSEL 19: 564-67).

³⁵ Lactantius, *Inst.* 6.23.18 (CSEL 19: 567): *...ita genitalem corporis partem, quod nomen ipsum docet, nulla alia causa nisi efficiendae subolis accepimus.*

including oral sex,³⁶ as contrary to nature and against God's order.³⁷) Such a construction is, however, found in Augustine's treatise *On the Goodness of Marriage*.³⁸ In his ordering of sexual relations within marriage, Augustine pardons relations that are enjoyed without the intention of begetting children so long as such relations are not "contrary to nature." For this *caveat* Augustine invokes the authority of Paul and alludes to Romans 1:26.³⁹ Sexual relations that are "contrary to nature" are abhorrent, whether they are had with one's wife or with a prostitute. In fact, it is more offensive for a man to have such relations with his wife than with a prostitute,⁴⁰ and the shame for the wife is greater if she submits herself to such relations than if she permits her husband to have them with a prostitute.⁴¹ Augustine does not specify exactly what acts he has in mind, but presumably they included anal intercourse.⁴² Thus, in taking verse 26 to refer to sexual relations between women and men that are "other than nature prescribed," Ambrosiaster's comment in *α* can be seen as continuous with both earlier and later moralizing by Latin Christian writers about acceptable sexual relations.

³⁶ Lactantius, *Inst.* 6.23.11-12 (CSEL 19: 566): *et tamen dicendum est, quia fit: de istis loquor quorum taeterrima libido et execrabilis furor ne capiti quidem parcit.*

³⁷ Lactantius, *Inst.* 6.23.8 (CSEL 19: 565-66): *idem etiam mares maribus adplicuit et nefandos coitus contra naturam contraque institutum dei machinatus est.*

³⁸ For an overview of the treatise, see M.-F. Berrouard, "Bono coniugali, De," *Augustinus Lexicon* 1 (1986-1994) 658-66; D. G. Hunter, "Bono coniugali, De," in A. D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 110-11; P. G. Walsh, "Introduction," in P. G. Walsh (ed. and trans.), *Augustine, De bono coniugali and De sancta uirginitate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) ix-xxiv.

³⁹ Augustine, *Bon. coniug.* 10.11 (CSEL 41: 202-3): *...nec inmutetur in eum usum, qui est contra naturam, de quo apostolus tacere non potuit, cum de corruptelis nimis immundorum et inpiorum hominum loqueretur.* In *Nupt.* 20.35 (CSEL 42: 289), written almost two decades later, Augustine again appeals to Rom. 1:26 with reference to unnatural sexual relations within marriage.

⁴⁰ Augustine, *Bon. coniug.* 11.12 (CSEL 41: 203): *nam cum ille naturalis usus, quando prolabitur ultra pacta nuptialia, id est ultra propagandi necessitatem, uenialis sit in uxore, in meretrice damnabilis, iste, qui est contra naturam, execrabiliter fit in meretrice, sed execrabilis in uxore.* Cf. Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 353-55.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Bon. coniug.* 11.12 (CSEL 41: 204): *cum uero uir membro mulieris non ad hoc concessio uti uoluerit, turpior est uxor, si in se quam si in alia fieri permiserit.*

⁴² Cf. Walsh, *De bono coniugali*, 27 n. 51.

This leads us to Ambrosiaster's reading of the verse in β and γ . If, as the evidence has led me and others to conclude, these versions derive from Ambrosiaster, he evidently changed his mind on the meaning of verse 26. He now understands it to refer to unacceptable sexual relations between women. Such a complete change in the reading of a passage is unusual in Ambrosiaster's exegetical writings. Typically his revisions expand or reinforce his earlier position or interpretation. Here, however, we have a repudiation of a prior interpretation. In fact, Ambrosiaster goes so far as to say that those who interpret the verse differently "do not perceive clearly the import of the words." Since Ambrosiaster himself read the verse differently in α , we cannot help but wonder what led him to revise his reading and who the other interpreters were.

Before we turn to these questions, we should examine how Ambrosiaster now explains the passage. The argument that Ambrosiaster offers in support of his revised reading of verse 26 turns on a comparison of the wording of verses 26 and 27, particularly the difference between the statement that "females exchanged natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature" and the statement that men had "forsaken natural intercourse with females." From the difference in wording Ambrosiaster extrapolates a difference in sexual activity. As I have already noted, he takes *immutare* in verse 26 to refer to a change from procreative vaginal intercourse between women and men to vaginal intercourse between women, and *relinquere* in verse 27 to refer to a change from procreative vaginal intercourse between women and men to anal intercourse between men.

This deliberate and independent effort to make sense of the words of the text is characteristic of Ambrosiaster. It can sometimes result in idiosyncratic and strained interpretations of biblical usage, as Marie-Pierre Bussièrès has observed in her study of Ambrosiaster's rendering

of the term “Spirit” in the Old Testament.⁴³ Since there are very few discussions of, or references to, Romans 1:26-27 in Latin Christian literature prior to Ambrosiaster, we cannot be certain that Ambrosiaster’s reasoning in β and γ is original. However, the close argumentation in β and γ based on the wording of verses 26 and 27 inclines me to the view that Ambrosiaster developed this particular argument largely on his own. This is not to say that the view it expresses is unique. Most Christian authorities condemned homoerotic relations, usually with reference to males,⁴⁴ and Ambrosiaster was undoubtedly aware of this prevailing opinion. But in this instance Ambrosiaster is not so much echoing a general condemnation as arguing for a particular reading of verse 26, and the reasoning is his own. It reflects his exegetical habits.

To whom, however, is Ambrosiaster referring when in the course of articulating this particular reading he remarks that those who interpret the verse differently “do not perceive clearly the import of the words”? Karl Schelkle suggested that Ambrosiaster may have been aware of interpretations like the one reported by Hippolytus of Rome in his description and refutation of the views of the Naasenes.⁴⁵ The Naasenes, as understood by Hippolytus, read Romans 1:20-27 as conveying an “unspeakable mystery of blessed pleasure” in veiled language.⁴⁶ What exactly they meant by this is unclear, except that it suggests a positive and allegorical reading of verse 26.⁴⁷ But it seems unlikely that Hippolytus or reports based on Hippolytus are behind Ambrosiaster’s remark. Hippolytus wrote in Greek, whereas Ambrosiaster had little Greek. While we cannot rule

⁴³ M.-P. Bussi eres, “L’esprit de Dieu et l’Esprit Saint dans les *Questions sur l’Ancien et le Nouveau Testament* de l’Ambrosiaster,” *Revue d’ tudes augustiniennes et patristiques* 56 (2010) 25-44.

⁴⁴ Among Latin Christian writers known to Ambrosiaster, see, e.g., Tertullian, *Pud.* 4.5 (CCSL 2: 1287); Cyprian, *Ad Don.* 9 (CCSL 3A: 8); Novatian, *Bon. pud.* 3.5 (CCSL 4: 116); and, as noted above (n. 37), Lactantius, *Inst.* 6.23.8-13 (CSEL 19: 565-66).

⁴⁵ Schelkle, *Paulus: Lehrer der V ter*, 64.

⁴⁶ Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.7.19, in M. Marcovich (ed.), *Hippolytus: Refutatio omnium haeresium* (PTS 25; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986) 147.

⁴⁷ See Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 338-43, and the literature discussed there.

out that Ambrosiaster had some knowledge of Greek writers through second-hand reports or Latin translations⁴⁸—he appears to be indebted to Irenaeus on some points⁴⁹—Ambrosiaster nowhere quotes or refers to Hippolytus.⁵⁰ Moreover, Ambrosiaster’s reference to those who explain verse 26 differently does not suggest the views of a heretical group. Ambrosiaster does not hesitate to name a heretic when he sees one.⁵¹ So it is odd that he does not mention the Neseenes in rejecting a reading attributed to them. We must look elsewhere.

Tertullian should be considered, for two reasons. Ambrosiaster appears to have been indebted more to Tertullian than to other writers he cites,⁵² and one of the few extant allusions in Latin Christian literature to Romans 1:26 is found in Tertullian’s *On the Crown*. There Tertullian invokes Paul’s argument in Romans 1 as evidence of a natural law that wearing a laurel crown, among other practices, contravenes: “But in the preceding part of the letter Paul assuredly defends natural use (or intercourse) when he states that in retribution for their error, as punitive recompense,⁵³ males and females altered with each other the natural use of creation into an unnatural use.”⁵⁴ It is not clear whether Tertullian is referring here to “unnatural” sex between

⁴⁸ It is telling that Jerome and Rufinus found it necessary to translate the works of Greek Christian writers into Latin for western readers, and that they acquired their facility in Greek while living in the East. On this, and on the decline of knowledge of Greek language and literature in the West in the early fifth century, see G. Bardy, “La culture grecque de l’Occident chrétien au IV^e siècle,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 29 (1939) 5-58; P. Courcelle, *Les lettres grecques en occident de Macrobe à Cassiodore*, 2d ed. (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948) 37-40, 129-36; P. Hamblenne, “L’apprentissage du grec par Jérôme: quelques ajustements,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994) 353-64.

⁴⁹ A. Souter, “Prolegomna,” in A. Souter (ed.), *Pseudo-Augustini Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti CXXVII* (CSEL 50; Vienna: Tempsky; Leipzig: Freytag, 1908) xxv, with 501; Di Santo, *L’Apologetica dell’Ambrosiaster*, 439, 486-88, 514.

⁵⁰ Cf. Lunn-Rockliffe, *Ambrosiaster’s Political Theology*, 59-60.

⁵¹ See, e.g., the *index nominum* at CSEL 81/1: 348-56 s.v. *Catafrygae, Donatiani, Fotiniani, Fotinus, Manichaei, Manichaeus, Marcion, Marcionitae, Maximilla, Montanus, Novatiani, Novatianus, Patriciani, Priscilla, Sabellus*.

⁵² M.-P. Bussièrès, “Les *quaestiones* 114 et 115 de l’Ambrosiaster ont-elles été influencées par l’apologétique de Tertullien ?” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 48 (2002) 101-30; cf. Di Santo, *L’Apologetica dell’Ambrosiaster*, 514.

⁵³ On the meaning of *in vicem poenae*, here rendered “as punitive recompense,” see n. 55 below.

⁵⁴ Tertullian, *Cor.* 6.1 (CCSL 2: 1046-47): *Sed et in priore epistolae <parte>, naturalem usum conditionis in non naturalem masculos et feminas inter se demutasse affirmans ex retributione erroris in uicem poenae, utique naturali usui patrocinator.* Some manuscripts have *naturalibus* (“things natural” or “nature”) instead of *naturali usui* (“natural

partners of the opposite sex or partners of the same sex. The interpretation turns on whether *inter se* is understood to refer reflexively to men and women separately (men altered the natural use of creation with each other, and women altered the natural use of creation with each other) or together (men and women altered the natural use of creation with each other). It is difficult to be certain, since Tertullian deals with the passage in a summary fashion. The fact that Tertullian mentions both males and females suggests that he is referring to verse 27 as well as verse 26. This is supported by his allusion to the last clause of verse 27,⁵⁵ which explains that unnatural sexual intercourse was punishment for having fallen away from the worship of the true God. If Tertullian is summarizing both verses, he is probably referring to men and women separately. In any event, there is no unequivocal precedent here for Ambrosiaster's initial reading of verse 26.

Another possible source of Ambrosiaster's initial reading of verse 26 is Marius Victorinus. There is evidence that Ambrosiaster was indebted to Victorinus' extant commentary on Paul's letters.⁵⁶ It is reasonable to assume that he would have been aware of Victorinus' commentary on Romans as well. Particularly interesting for our purposes is Victorinus' treatment of difficult or ambiguous passages. At several points in his commentary on Galatians, for instance, Victorinus considers alternative interpretations of a difficult phrase, explaining at length his reasons for

use" or "natural intercourse"). The former reading is preferred by J. Fontaine (ed.), *Tertullien: Sur la couronne. Édition, introduction et commentaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966) 86-87.

⁵⁵ Tertullian's *ex retributione erroris in uicem poenae* would appear to be based on Paul's *et mercedem quam oportuit erroris sui in semetipsis recipientis*. According to the Vetus Latina Database (16 June 2010), our only attestations from North Africa of this part of verse 27 are found in the writings of Augustine, who often quotes it as *et mercedem mutuam quam oportuit erroris sui in semetipsis recipientis*; cf. *Iul.* 5.3.10 (PL 44: 789); *Leg.* 1.24.51 (CCSL 49: 83); *Nat. et grat.* 22.24 (CSEL 60: 250); *In Rom.* 5.1 (CSEL 84: 4). The variant *mercedem mutuam*, "mutual reward," leads one to ask whether *in uicem* in Tertullian's sentence should be read as *inuicem*, "one with another"; cf. A. Blaise, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954) s.v. *inuicem*. However, there is no other instance of *inuicem* in Tertullian's works, but there is one other instance of *in uicem* with the genitive, *Marc.* 4.16 (CCSL 1: 469.1): *ut idem uideatur oculus pro oculo et dentem pro dente in uicem iniuriae exigere*. Moreover, according to the Library of Latin Christian Texts and the Vetus Latina Database (16 June 2010), the variant *mercedem mutuam* is not attested by any other Latin Christian writer.

⁵⁶ See now Cooper, *Marius Victorinus' Commentary*, 182-246.

adopting one or another of the interpretations.⁵⁷ Ambrosiaster appears to have followed him at some of these points, while nevertheless maintaining his own style and independence as an interpreter.⁵⁸ Did Victorinus propose the interpretation of verse 26 that Ambrosiaster initially accepted but subsequently rejected? Did Victorinus consider both interpretations of verse 26 that we find in Ambrosiaster's successive comments, but argue for the interpretation that we find in Ambrosiaster's initial comment?⁵⁹ We have no way of knowing, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. Similarly, we cannot rule out the possibility that Augustine's reading of verse 26, which he took to refer to "unnatural" sex between partners of the opposite sex, was influenced by comments of prior interpreters, and that this tradition of interpretation was known in Rome when Ambrosiaster was writing his comments.

These scenarios are, evidently, speculative. But they would explain Ambrosiaster's reference to uncomprehending interpreters in **β** and **γ**, as well as his own initial reading of verse 26 in **α**. Although Ambrosiaster came to regard his initial reading as mistaken, he nevertheless would have had to acknowledge its pedigree and currency. Hence his aside in **β** and **γ** about those who do not understand the import of Paul's words.

In the end, however, the identification of the interpreters or traditions to which Ambrosiaster refers in **β** and **γ** is probably less important than the fact that differing interpretations of verse 26 were known to Ambrosiaster and, presumably, others in Rome. Ambrosiaster, we know, composed answers and tracts in response to questions and issues that arose in the Christian community in Rome.⁶⁰ The fact that he refers to another reading of verse 26 and that he troubles

⁵⁷ E.g., Marius Victorinus, *In Gal.* 2:4-5, 2:12-13, 2:19, 4:4, 4:9, 4:14 (CSEL 83/2: 113-15, 119-20, 123-24, 140, 144-46, 148-49).

⁵⁸ Cooper, *Marius Victorinus' Commentary*, 200, 206-9, 213-14, 224.

⁵⁹ As, e.g., at Gal 1:19; cf. Cooper, *Marius Victorinus' Commentary*, 214.

⁶⁰ The occasional character of the various materials assembled in the *Questions*, and the implications of their

to revise his comment on the verse, coupled with the insistence of his argumentation in β and γ , suggests that there was awareness, and possibly even discussion, of differing interpretations of Romans 1:26-27 among Christians in Roman. In other words, the interpretation of the passage was not fixed within Christian circles in Rome in the latter half of the fourth century. Although both non-Christian and Christian moral discourse tended to condemn homoerotic sexual relations, Christian teachers did not necessarily read verse 26 as referring to such relations. When Ambrosiaster comes to accept such a reading, he is obliged to argue for it on the basis of the connection he now perceives between the logic of verses 26 and 27. He also points to the presence of homoerotic relations between women in Rome in his own day to persuade his reader that such relations would have existed in Rome when Paul wrote his letter. All in all, the comments offer an unusual glimpse of the interaction between cultural perceptions, contemporary debates, and exegetical logic in the hermeneutics of this fourth-century Roman teacher.

arrangement into a collection, is perceptively discussed by M.-P. Bussi eres, "Le public des *Questions sur l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament* de l'Ambrosiaster," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 24 (2007) 229-47, esp. 231-34. Cf. also Lunn-Rockliffe, *Ambrosiaster's Political Theology*, 69-72; Di Santo, *L'Apologetica dell'Ambrosiaster*, 29.

Appendix: Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.* 1:26-27 (CSEL 81/1: 50.1-52.4, 51.1-53.5). The divisions of the text follow the Vienna edition. Changes from **α** to **β** and from **β** to **γ** are in bold.

α: 1:26 *propterea tradidit illos deus in passiones ignominiae. nam feminae eorum immutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum, qui est contra naturam.*

haec irato deo propter idolatriam humano generi provenisse testator, ut se viris feminae aliter quam natura dictavit offerrent. qualitatem operis inmunditiae ipsius ostendit, pro quo nunc declarat:

1:27 *similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desiderium sui invicem, masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes,*

1. *manifestum est, ut, quia veritatem dei immutaverunt in mendacium, immutarent et naturalem usum in eum usum, per quem dehonestarentur, rei facti mortis. quoniam enim aliam legem dare non potest satanas—nihil enim habet concessa et*

β: 1:26 *propterea tradidit illos deus in passiones ignominiae. nam feminae eorum immutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum, qui est contra naturam.*

*haec irato deo propter idolatriam humano generi provenisse testator, **ut mulier mulierem turpi desiderio ad usum adpeteret. quod quidam aliter interpretantur non perspicientes vim dicti. quid est enim immutare naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam, nisi sublato concesso usu aliter uti, ut una atque eadem pars corporis aliter se ad usum praebeat quam concessum est? nam si illa est pars corporis, quomodo immutaverunt usum naturae, cum non habeat huiusmodi usum datum a natura? superius iam traditos dixerat in inmunditiam, non tamen** qualitatem operis inmunditiae ipsius **ostenderat, pro quo nunc declarat:***

1:27 *similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desiderium sui invicem, masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes,*

1a. **nunc manifestavit, quomodo superius de mulieribus quod dixit, intellegi debeat. quando autem subiecit: similiter et masculi, dicens, exarserunt in desiderium sui, ostendit apertum peccatum mulierum. denique mulieres inter se**

γ: 1:26 *propterea tradidit illos deus in passiones ignominiae. nam feminae eorum immutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum, qui est contra naturam.*

*haec irato deo propter idolatriam humano generi provenisse testator, ut **femina feminam** turpi desiderio ad usum adpeteret. quod quidam aliter interpretantur non perspicientes vim dicti. quid est enim immutare naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam, nisi sublato concesso usu aliter uti, ut una atque eadem pars corporis **[unusquisque inter se invicem sexus G²]** aliter se ad usum praebeat quam concessum est? **si ergo** illa est pars corporis **[quam putant D A]**, quomodo immutaverunt usum naturalem, cum non habeat huiusmodi usum datum a natura? **igitur** superius iam traditos dixerat in inmunditiam, non tamen **qualitatem inmunditiae ipsius operis ostenderat, quod nunc declarat:***

1:27 *similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desiderium sui invicem, masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes,*

1a. *nunc manifestavit, quomodo [superius some MSS] de mulieribus quod **supra** dixit, intellegi debeat. quando autem subiecit **dicens: similiter autem** et masculi exarserunt **invicem** in desiderium sui, ostendit **aperte** peccatum mulierum.*

licita—, in alium ordinem versat, ut dum aliter fiunt quam concessa sunt, sint peccatum.

accusat et viros similiter. 1. manifestum autem est, ut, quia veritatem dei immutaverunt in mendacium, immutarent et naturalem usum in eum usum, per quem dehonestarentur, rei facti mortis secundae. quoniam enim aliam legem dare non potest satanas—nihil enim habet concessa et licita—, in alium ordinem versat, ut dum aliter fiunt quam concessa sunt, sint peccatum.

denique non dixit de viris, quod immutaverint naturalem usum in invicem, quia huiusmodi usus huic parti concessus non est. quid mirum, cum hodieque tales mulieres reperiantur, ut sicut illud a viris, ita et hoc a mulieribus sit inventum? nam mulieres inter se accusat et viros similiter. 1. manifestum est ergo, ut, quia veritatem dei immutaverunt in mendacium, immutarent et naturalem usum in eum usum, per quem dehonestarentur, rei facti mortis secundae. [quoniam enim aliam legem dare non potest satanas—nihil enim habet concessa et licita—, in alium ordinem versat, ut dum aliter fiunt quam concessa sunt, sint peccatum. G² A]

1:27 et compensationem mercedis quam oportet erroris sui in semetipsos recipientes.

2. hanc dicit compensationem esse contempti dei, id est turpitudinem et contaminationem. haec est enim prima causa peccati. quid enim peius, quid deterius hoc peccato? quantum enim idolatria perimpium et gravissimum delictum est, tantum et compensatio eius horrenda et persordida passio est.

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2. hanc dicit compensationem esse contempti dei, id est turpitudinem et obscenitatem. haec est enim prima causa peccati. quid enim peius, quid deterius hoc peccato, quod et diabolus decepit et hominem morti fecit obnoxium? [quantum enim idolatria perimpium et gravissimum delictum est, tantum et compensatio eius horrenda et persordida passio est. D]

English translation:

α: 1:26 “For this reason God gave them up to disgraceful passions. For their females⁶¹ exchanged natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature.”

He bears witness that these things befell the human race because God was angered by idolatry: females would offer themselves to men in ways other than nature prescribed. He explains the character of their impure behavior, regarding which he now states:

β: 1:26 “For this reason God gave them up to disgraceful passions. For their females exchanged natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature.”

He bears witness that these things befell the human race because God was angered by idolatry: **a woman would seek to have intercourse with a woman out of base lust. Some explain this differently because they do not perceive clearly the import of the words. What in fact does it mean to exchange “natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature,” if not to engage in another form of intercourse once the permissible form of intercourse has been done away with, so that one and the same part of the body offers itself to a form of intercourse other than the permissible form? For if that part of the body (i.e., the anus) is meant, how did they exchange the intercourse of nature, since that part of the body does not have such a use given by nature? He had already stated above**

γ: 1:26 “For this reason God gave them up to disgraceful passions. For their females exchanged natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature.”

He bears witness that these things befell the human race because God was angered by idolatry: a **female** would seek to have intercourse with a **female** out of base lust. Some explain this differently because they do not perceive clearly the import of the words. What in fact does it mean to exchange “natural intercourse for that intercourse which is contrary to nature,” if not to engage in another form of intercourse once the permissible form of intercourse has been done away with, so that one and the same part of the body [**of each sex with each other together G²**] offers itself to a form of intercourse other than the permissible form? **If, then**, that part of the body (i.e., the anus) is meant, [**as they think D A,**] how did they exchange **natural** intercourse, since that part of the body does not have such a use

⁶¹ I render *feminae* as “females”, *masculi* as “males”, *mulieres* as “women”, and *viri* as “men” in order to indicate where these words appear in the lemmata and comments. In fact, however, Ambrosiaster does not appear to distinguish between *feminae* and *mulieres* or between *masculi* and *viri*; they are used interchangeably in his comments; cf. n. 26 above.

that they were given up to impurity (Rom. 1:24), but he had not explained the character of their impure behavior, regarding which he now states:

1:27 “And likewise the males,⁶² too, having forsaken natural intercourse with females, were consumed with desire for one another, males committing shameful acts with males,”

1. It is clear that, because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, they also exchanged natural intercourse for that intercourse by which they were shamefully disgraced, and were condemned to death. Because Satan cannot give another law—he possesses nothing that is acceptable or lawful—he took another tack, so that when they behaved otherwise than was permitted, they became sin.

1:27 “And likewise the males, too, having forsaken natural intercourse with females, were consumed with desire for one another, males committing shameful acts with males,”

1a. **He has now made plain how what he said above about the women should be understood. When he added: “And likewise the males, too, were consumed with desire for one another,” he disclosed the manifest sin of the women. In short, he charges the women with each other, and the men likewise.** 1. It is clear, **then**, that, because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, they also exchanged natural intercourse for that intercourse by which they were shamefully disgraced, and were condemned to **the second** death. Because Satan cannot give another law—he possesses nothing that is acceptable or lawful—he took another

given by nature? He had, **therefore**, already stated above that they were given up to impurity (Rom. 1:24), but he had not explained **the character of the impurity of their behavior, which** he now states.

1:27 “And likewise the males, too, having forsaken natural intercourse with females, were consumed with desire for one another, males committing shameful acts with males,”

1a. He has now made plain how what he said **above** about the women should be understood. When he added: “And likewise the males, **too**, were consumed with desire **for one another**,” he **clearly** showed the sin of the women. **In short, he did not say that the men exchanged natural intercourse with one another, because such intercourse is not permitted for this part (i.e., the anus). When even today one may come upon such women, is it surprising that just as that intercourse (i.e., anal intercourse) is devised by men, so too this intercourse (i.e., vaginal intercourse) is devised by women? For** he charges the women with each other, and the men likewise. 1. It is

⁶² Cf. n. 61.

tack, so that when they behaved otherwise than was permitted, they became sin.

clear, **therefore**, that, because they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, they also exchanged natural intercourse for a form of intercourse by which they were shamefully disgraced, and were condemned to the second death. [Because Satan cannot give another law—he possesses nothing that is acceptable or lawful—he took another tack, so that when they behaved otherwise than was permitted, they became sin. G² A]

1:27 “and receiving in themselves the recompense their error deserves.”

2. He says that this is the recompense from God when he has been scorned, namely, lewdness and pollution. This (i.e., idolatry) is in fact the first cause of sin. What is worse, what is baser, than this sin? Just as idolatry is a most godless and serious transgression, so too is its recompense a dreadful and disgusting passion.

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