

PAUL'S PRO-SEX ANTI-DESIRE STANCE

Jeremy Punt (Stellenbosch University)

In the New Testament, Paul's letters are characterised by an uneasiness with desire far more than with sex. Traditionally, this distinction is not made, and concerns with ἐπιθυμία (desire) and πορνεία (sexual immorality) are often explained by an appeal to eschatology. Contemporary gender patterns constitute a more appropriate heuristic framework for Paul's utilitarian and at times positive understanding of sex, compared to his consistent resistance to desire. Examples are offered of Paul's anti-desire, pro-sex stance.

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Introduction

The tendency to equate sex and desire, as popular but as unfounded as it may be at times, is not always helpful for making sense of ancient texts such as the Pauline letters. The penchant to transfer modern assumptions to the ancient texts and contexts, especially when it comes to intimate personal and public social matters such as sex and desire, and links between them, makes it even more important to study ancient texts in their historical settings. In the case of New Testament texts, pre-conceived theological frameworks can also impose on interpretation, and prevent a 1st century-attuned understanding of the connection—or better, disjunction—between sex and desire in the Pauline letters. However, given the ancient world's variety of stances pertaining to sex and desire and the proper place and role of each, socio-historically attuned readings offer no interpretive guarantees. One example is a study on infertility in biblical times which recently claimed that not even procreation was of sufficient importance for Paul to require Jesus followers to engage in sexual intercourse. Paul (as shorthand for the Pauline letters) is thought to have conceived of family and union with God outside of biological procreative structures and strictures, in an effort to divorce sex, marriage, and procreation from one another (Moss and Baden 2015:191). However, highlighting Paul's non-procreationist sex-stance, but skipping over his larger concern with desire, demonstrates the need for caution when trying to make sense of Pauline sex.

Paul's decidedly bad reputation when it comes to matters political and sexual—whose connection was not uncommon in the first century¹—rests on his

¹ In first century AD literature, desire was not necessarily personalised or restricted to the individual; desire and passions could in ancient times be political as much as politics could

perceived restriction of human freedom as much as on what at times is seen as his confirmation and even reestablishment of existing Roman social power structures (see recently, *e.g.*, Tucker 2017:72–87). Such concerns are not addressed in detail here, since my interest in this short contribution is to examine the tension between desire and sex in the Pauline letters, in continuation of a conversation initiated by Martin (1997:201–15) and continued by Wheeler-Reed (2017:65–73). Against the ongoing conflation of desire and sex in analyses of the Pauline letters, Martin and Wheeler-Reed both insist that, in a first century AD milieu, sex and desire should not be simply associated or equated, with Martin (1997) focusing on the control of desire and Wheeler-Reed (2017:63–83) on the development of contrasting traditions pro- and anti-marriage or family. My emphasis in this article is on the very division between sex and desire itself, and on Pauline notions about the value of sex. A further caveat is that, in my view, the differences between ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish sexual practices should not be overemphasised, regardless of biblical rhetoric:² D’Angelo (2014:535) notes that ‘after 200 BCE, “interactions” fits the relationship between Jewish sexual practices and those of Greeks and Romans better than does “influences”’. Furthermore, my reading is not ‘theological’ (in the narrow sense), as such readings all too often rely on natural or normalising perspectives, biased towards and defined by the sexual and erotic privileging of the monogamous couple often to be completed by the fulfilment of the desire to raise children.³ Even supporters of same-sex unions tend to rely on this rhetoric (see, *e.g.*, Keen 2018), arguing for it as the basis for ‘normal’ family life—regularly failing to account, however, for how horizons of intelligibility and practices of recognition structure such positions (see further Thiem 2005:779–788; also Stuart 1997:185–204).

First-century sex and desire: links and distinctions

The absence of a term for ‘sexuality’ does not imply its absence nor reduce its role in the lives of people in antiquity. It is, however, an early signal that modern assumptions may be less than helpful for understanding sex, first-century style.⁴

be understood and framed as passionate and erotic; cf. Ludwig 2002.

² ‘Scholarship has tended to focus on sexual ethics and to contrast Jewish sexual mores to those of Greece and Rome, encouraged by the Jewish (and Christian) texts that insist that their sexual probity makes them ‘not like the Gentiles’, cf. D’Angelo 2014:534.

³ When erotic is understood to mean the innate dynamic drive expressed in the deepest desire for union with others, and the divine as ‘empowered physicality’, then ‘lovemaking is justice making as it fuels our indignation at the pain and exploitation of the bodies of others’ (Isherwood and Stuart 1998:48, referring to Heyward), challenging rigid divisions between sex, spirituality and the divine. See also Ellison (1996:312–322).

⁴ Concepts of sexuality and sexual identity, common in modern analysis, are absent from

Moreover, as Nussbaum (1994:9) notes, '[i]f passions are formed (at least in part) out of beliefs or judgments, and if socially taught beliefs are frequently unreliable, then passions need to be scrutinized in just the way in which other socially taught beliefs are scrutinized'. Sexuality in a collectivist world that set stock by core values such as honour and shame, meant isomorphic sexual and social relations which ensured that honour was ascribed to the active, penetrating sexual role.⁵ This is not to subscribe to the Dover-Foucault 'zero-sum game of penetration as ... central preoccupation' as criticised by Davidson (2001:18) and others in the Greek contexts, but to resist the imposition of a modern romanticism on ancient texts and to allow for Roman influence (Davidson 2001:28–29) in such understandings. Craig Williams suggests that, for Roman minds, desire was gender-enabled in terms of agency even if gender-limited in terms of social regime. He makes the point that as long as the proper social protocols relevant to status were maintained, it was mostly assumed that 'as a group, men normally experience desire for both female and male bodies' (Williams 2010:31).

Unlike the relatively recent notion that relationships have a romantic base if not origin, the often pragmatic setting of past sexual relations rendered a biblical world where in so far as categorisation took place, it concerned sexual acts rather than people, as tends to happen in modern times.⁶ Ancients typically believed that sexual desire, as a primary origin of vices, should be constrained. Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* (191a–c) sets the scene, with sexual desire portrayed as punishment but sexual intercourse as a merciful act. It was the gods who saved humankind through sexual intercourse, providing relief from sexual desire which

ancient literature; so too, modern ideas about pornographic, sinful or shameful cannot simplistically be transposed onto the ancient world. Modern terminology often obscures ancient meaning. Even if considered socially problematic in certain areas, sexual pleasure with which the goddess Venus (and Aphrodite) was associated, was rated positively in Roman antiquity, and public displays of erotica symbolised wealth and luxury. 'Sex was a blessing from the gods, in whatever form it took' (Olson 2014:165).

⁵ Malina 1993:135: 'Male honor is symbolized in the male sexual organs'; Cahill's initial comment may lead to overstatement in conclusion, '[v]irtually all sex in the climate out of which the New Testament arose served special social purposes; it seems unexaggerated to say that it was virtually everywhere a symbol of domination' (Cahill 1996:152). See also Moore's nuanced criticism of the Dover-Foucault zero-sum model of Greek sexuality (Moore 2023:150–174, esp. 1531–1554; Garton 2004:30–47).

⁶ Gender conventions and desire in particular were seen to impact not only on individual lives but on broader society as well; see, e.g., Roisman 2005:166 on the Athenian orators: 'Sexual desire and nonconjugal love affairs constituted threats to one's manhood, to the performance of the roles of a *kurios*, kinsman, and citizen, and to the entire polis'. Some scholars even argue, for the Greeks sexual desire was like 'a plague, a syndrome like AIDS that attacks the body and mind on several different fronts, ultimately leading, as with Heracles and Phaedra, to death', Thornton 1997:35.

would otherwise be counter-indicative of life. More radically, Gaca argues that '[s]exual desire according to Plato is the most incorrigible of the inherently antirational physical appetites and gives rise to myriad ills individually and socially' (Gaca 2003:57). In a hierarchical and patriarchal world, sex was not so much an act of fulfilment than an action done to another.⁷ Such a depersonalised and depersonalising attitude toward sexuality did not exclude the possibility of sustained and fulfilling sexual relations and also did not suspend the inextricable links between sexual identity and social and political identity,⁸ but underscored that the social body preceded the sexual body. Exhibiting uneasiness regarding their bodies and sexuality that saw sex as largely debilitating since it withdrew men's vital life force,⁹ ancients relied on various means such as medical expertise to resolve the tension (Rousselle 1988).

A widely held belief derived from Aristotle that only men produced seed, rendered women's sexual satisfaction and orgasm irrelevant, at least as far as many medical authors and others were concerned.¹⁰ Rousselle (1988) concludes that life in Roman society did not offer women much in terms of enjoyment of their bodies or sexuality. The male-biased claim of Pseudo-Demosthenes 59:122 endured into New Testament times:

τὰς μὲν γὰρ ἐταίρας ἡδονῆς ἔνεκ' ἔχομεν, τὰς δὲ παλλακὰς τῆς καθ' ἡμέραν
θεραπείας τοῦ σώματος, τὰς δὲ γυναῖκας τοῦ παιδοποιεῖσθαι γησιῶς καὶ
τῶν ἔνδον φύλακα πιστὴν ἔχειν.

Courtesans we keep for pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our bodies, and wives to procreate children legitimately and to have a trusty guardian of the things inside/be a trustworthy guardian of the household.

The extent to which it was lived up to, of course, would have depended on social, economic, and other factors. Still, as is the case with other descriptive or

⁷ Romantic feelings that emerged from relationships, as attested to in literature and material culture of the time, were not considered a prerequisite for relationships or their authenticity. But see also Davidson's (2001:46–51) warnings against the sexualisation of Greek (homo)sexuality.

⁸ Nissinen 1998:128: '[D]escriptions of sexual relations were dominated by a hierarchical polarization based on the congruence of social status and sexual hierarchy'.

⁹ The ancient belief that sexual activity and loss of semen weakened the body, while abstinence maintained strength and exemplified self-control is reflected in Hippocrates' call on sexual restraint for athletes (*Prorrhetic* 2.1.4); and in Plato's account of Ikkos of Tarentum and other athletes who increased their vigour and chances of victory (Pl. *Leg.* 839C–840C; also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 28.12; Aretaues, *De causis et signis acutorum morborum* 2.5.4); Philostratos *De gymnastica* 49–52 suggests that sexual acts and nocturnal emissions weaken the body; see also Fischer 2014:260–261.

¹⁰ For further discussion of women and sex in antiquity, see Harris 2004.

prescriptive statements in ancient texts regardless of their uptake, the foundational androcentric and mostly patriarchal sentiments are revealing, as are the perceived connections between sex and pleasure, and the emphasis on marriage and children—aspects that were not necessarily connected. Elite sentiments hardly described the lives of people in general, but elite anxieties were often the reason for legal arrangements and social systems. Concerns about protecting elite households' *dignitas* may have been the real reason for imperial legislation regulating sexual activity and marital arrangements, yet such regulations extended to all (Glancy 2006:27).

In the first century AD, scepticism towards passions, pleasure, and desire was exemplified by their rejection by some Stoics on the basis of ideals of self-sufficiency and the belief that self-control brought about true happiness.¹¹ In line with early Stoics like Zeno and Chrysippus who rehabilitated sexual *eros* into good *eros*, some later Stoics (like Antipater, Hierocles, and Musonius) sought to refurbish sexual behaviour rationally so as to facilitate mutually friendly and respectful relations. For others, however, like Seneca and Musonius, sexual desire had to be avoided, but without shunning the duty to procreate (Gaca 2003:92). Musonius (*Fr.* 14), for instance, held that the gods punished the covetous and protected marriage. The passions jeopardised control over the body, and 'desire was in some ways a special threat because it was a constant signal of need—insufficiency' (Martin 1997:210). Sex for the ancients in general was no more nor less problematic than eating and drinking,¹² and its regulation was intended to curb harmful effects to society but did not entail long moral codes of licit or illicit sexual behaviour (Lambert and Szesnat 1994:52–56; see Nissinen 1998:129–30).¹³ According to Aristotle as much as the Stoics, both dietary and sexual urges were natural and served to address the body's needs, but desires resulted from confusion regarding normal needs and urges.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. Maier 2019:197 on Stoic ἀπάθεια; on the Stoic stance regarding sex and desire, and how these related to marriage, see Grahm-Wilder 2018; also Frederickson 2003.

¹² To Moxnes 2003:76 the two areas of primary concern to self-control are sex and food.

¹³ While 'active and passive partners match the distinction between male and female roles', '[s]ame-sex sexual contacts were regarded as a voluntary perversion' (Nissinen 1998:128, 130). The notion that 'sperm contained the origin of human life', and therefore should not be wasted or used inappropriately (Nissinen 1998:130–131), should be noted.

¹⁴ Desire, therefore, signifies 'lack', and this was a painful confession for Graeco-Roman philosophers. True nobility was self-sufficient, just like the ancient aristocratic ideal of the self-sufficient household which was capable of growing all its own food, making all its own clothes and utensils, and running its own day-to-day affairs with no interference of any kind' (Martin 1997:210). However, Bosman (2015:16–28) cautions attention to different nuances among Greek philosophers and groups regarding self-sufficiency.

Absolute distinctions between Hellenistic and Jewish notions of the self in the first century are impossible, as signalled by Philo's Platonist model of the self, idealised with the spirit's persistent growth towards increasing self-mastery over bodily desires (Maier 2019:200–201). Second Temple (and later Rabbinic) Jews saw sexual intercourse as a way of reaffirming the marital bond in addition to procreation, but desire was also viewed with discomfort. Philo exemplifies strict Second Temple Jewish views that not only acts of defiance against God and God's rules were rebellious, but even the desire towards such acts. Philo removes all references to objects of desire such as the wife, the ox, and the plow from the tenth commandment against coveting (*Spec.* 4.78–9, cf. *Decal.* 142, 173–4): οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις (*Ex.* 20:17) for him aligns with other two-word dictates such as those at Delphi (e.g., μηδὲν ἄγαν, 'nothing in excess'). Marriage was for begetting children and not for satisfying desire; engaging in non-reproductive marital sexual activity and the immanent power and allure of sexual pleasure was tantamount to serving Aphrodite, who exercised sexual power over humans and all animals, in the sky and in the water and on land (*Spec.* 3.8–9, cf. *Hom. Hymn. Ven.* 5.1–6). Philo sought to regulate sex according to two principles, namely restraint over pleasure and civic responsibility (*Spec. Leg.* 3.7–82). Sex for pleasure alone was illegitimate, and scuppered procreation, just as sex with menstruating (32–3) or sterile women (34–6). So too, pederasty (37–42), bestiality (43–50), and sex with a prostitute (51) constitute mere gratification but were a waste of male semen due to the lack of ἐγκράτεια and ignored the duty to produce new citizens (see also D'Angelo 2014:542). Fuelled on by Plato's *Laws*, Philo stopped short of equating marital sexual activity for pleasure or for other non-procreative goals with apostasy, but 'the forbidden desire problem takes on a revolutionary new meaning' and would add 'to the drive toward sexual abstinence among post-apostolic and emergent orthodox Christians' (Gaca 2014:554).¹⁵

The pressure of Christian asceticism would later, slowly but surely, start to push away the Greek and Roman ideal of civic piety that was closely related to marriage and childbearing, to introduce a detachment from the social world and its commitments (Brown 1988:57–64; see also Wheeler-Reed 2017:63–102). Such developments in attitudes toward sexuality have had vast consequences and derived from a Christian disconnection between sex and nature in its ideal (sexual and social) form along the lines of garden of Eden portrayals. Brown (1988:33–44) scuttled popular but misplaced notions that dualistic (body vs soul) conceptions

¹⁵ Elsewhere, Gaca 2003:189 describes his approach as follows: 'Philo's religious sexual ethic is an innovative synthesis that combines the Pentateuchal laws and sexual poetics of spiritual fornication with the sexual reform plans of the Pythagoreans and Plato'. See also D'Angelo 2014:534–548 for a more detailed rendering of Philo's position on sex; Wheeler-Reed 2017:45–48.

constituted a betrayal of Hebraic holism, were derived from ascetics, and determined the early Jesus movement.¹⁶ For him, this shift of loyalties from one set of social institutions to new forms of community life, marked the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Rousselle (1988) suggests that in contrast to an earlier Greek ideal of physical beauty ('an analysis of attraction'), Christian asceticism identified desire as a problem that prevented union with God and required its eradication.¹⁷ This resulted in a shift from concern for the body of the other to the self. Rousselle's work shows that virginity's acclaim, and especially the way that aristocratic men and women in the West adopted it, can be considered the result or extension of laws and ordinary heterosexual relationships of the time.¹⁸ These later developments built on the uneasiness with desire rather than sex, the early traces of which can already be detected in the Pauline letters.

Paul, and sex and desire

Many voices in the New Testament show uneasiness with and even downright condemnation of passions, desires, and longings, even if one has to bear in mind, as with other ancient literature, the discursive or idealising nature of the New Testament texts (see Olson 2014:166). James (4.1–2) blames conflicts and disputes on desires within and among the community:¹⁹

Πόθεν πόλεμοι καὶ πόθεν μάχαι ἐν ὑμῖν; οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν, ἐκ τῶν ἡδονῶν ὑμῶν τῶν στρατευομένων ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ὑμῶν; 2 ἐπιθυμεῖτε καὶ οὐκ ἔχετε,

¹⁶ Brown 1988:5–64 shows, to the contrary, how in circles most closely related to Jewish Christianity such as apocalyptic Judaism, of which the Essenes were a good example, reaching towards the Encratites, a spirited and radical asceticism blossomed. And in the later, Egyptian-Christian desert tradition, rather than a dualistic attitude toward the body, a profound interconnection between body and soul was emphasised. The view that the body is an 'ideogram' of the heart, in the sense of a principal indication of the heart's state and register of worldly attachment, culminated in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus and John Cassian. Their intense scrutiny of the involuntary movements of the thoughts and body, such as nocturnal emissions, showed to what extent passion still dominated the human heart.

¹⁷ Rousselle's work (1988) focuses on changing attitudes towards the body, rather than continuities, in particular on how antiquity's concern with care of a healthy body made way for ascetic renunciation of bodily needs. Her focus is not on the relationship between bodies and state, but she investigates how men and women in the Roman Empire related to their own bodies, looking both at families and individuals.

¹⁸ For women in a patriarchal world with arranged marriages, adopting celibacy could be a coping mechanism. For men, the bias against sexual relations, which could bring on fatigue and drain a man's vital *pneuma*, sex was best reserved for purposes of procreation.

¹⁹ Dio Chrys. *Or.* 17:10 ascribes the cause of quarrels, internal strife and war more generally to the desire for more (τὴν τοῦ πλείονος ἐπιθυμίαν); cf. Malherbe 2014:341.

φονεύετε καὶ ζηλοῦτε καὶ οὐ δύνασθε ἐπιτυχεῖν, μάχεσθε καὶ πολεμεῖτε, οὐκ ἔχετε διὰ τὸ μὴ αἰτεῖσθαι ὑμᾶς.

Where do wars and battles come from among you? Is it not from your pleasures that are at war in your members? 2 You desire and do not have, you kill; you covet and cannot obtain, you fight and wage war; you do not have, because you do not ask.

It appears that for James (4:5) as for others (*e.g.*, Sirach 15:14), desire in itself is not evil, as it was created by God; instead it becomes evil and has consequences when left unregulated and unchecked.²⁰ In the Pauline letters with their apocalyptic mindset, however, desire is evil from the word go: an internal battle rages between good and evil powers, and between warring passions and desires. Pauline worries about controlling one's own body, avoiding sexual immorality (1 *Thees.* 4:3–5) and the effects of sex with prostitutes (1 *Cor.* 6:15–16), suggest that Paul shared the centuries-old discomfort with 'the animal-like compulsion of sexual yearning that most bewilders and beleaguers the human moral agent, philosopher, and theologian' (Cahill 1999:326). Paul probably did not study philosophical or medical treatises on sex and desire, and did not expound grand theories on these matters, though in all likelihood he had an inkling of such positions along the lines of what Gramsci called an 'organic intellectual'.²¹ Conventionally, Pauline ambivalence and even indifference towards sexuality and marriage has been explained with reference to strong eschatological views.²² With appeal to texts such as 1 *Cor.* 7:29–31, the expected Parousia is cited, then, as the primary reason for Paul's preference for celibacy (Wheeler-Reed 2017:65–73). However, the selective use of historical criticism makes the reliance on an imminent eschatological expectation to explain Pauline arguments doubtful and problematic. Paul's timeline miscalculations notwithstanding, the expectation of an imminent end as sole or primary explanation for his stance on sex and desire, is not justified: 'His argument is more robust than a misjudged apocalypse; there is a sustained thesis about the preferential status of the unmarried and the chaste' (Moss and Baden 2015:175). In the end, importantly, an appeal to his eschatological beliefs fails to explain why Paul rejected desire altogether but not sex, and moreover, fails to explain why Paul made this distinction in the first place. Paul's fulmination against πορνεία must not be confused with his tolerance of appropriate sex. Kathy Gaca (2014:558) adds a further element to the

²⁰ James names these as love of wealth (2:1–7; 5:1–6), no control over the tongue (3:6–12), and divisions (4:1–11).

²¹ Maier's suggestion that 'many biblical authors had a kind of popular eclectic knowledge of ethical theories and medical models of the self' (2019:178) can probably be extended beyond individuation.

²² *E.g.*, Hunter 2018:6–7: 'Paul viewed the lives and duties of married Christians through the lens of the expectation of the imminent end of time'.

density of first-century opinions about desire and sex, alluding to how religious elements in the narrower sense impacted such opinions:²³

From a Greek and Hellenized perspective ... to make love even for procreation involved the pleasurable act of giving Aphrodite her due. ... From this long-standing Greek perspective, it was impossible to imagine being sexually aroused or making love without showing Aphrodite her requisite honor and worship, for sexual arousal and activity were the ‘works [*erga*] of Aphrodite’.

Two issues count against her argument as an explanation for Paul’s stance on sex: (1) *Rom.* 1:18–32 does not argue that sex serves other gods, but the other way round: that idolatry brings about uncontrollable desire (cf. Punt 2008); (2) the broader context for Paul’s ambivalence on the sexuality of others and his negative stance on sexuality as far as he himself is concerned, more likely reflects established contemporary ideas about sex and desire.²⁴

The Pauline letters reflect deep concern about desire and its effects, as in the first-person remark in *Rom.* 7:7b:

τὴν τε γὰρ ἐπιθυμίαν οὐκ ᾔδειν εἰ μὴ ὁ νόμος ἔλεγεν· Οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις.

I would not have known what it is to covet, if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’.²⁵

²³ Gaca’s analysis allows for framing Paul’s position with regard to desire and sex in terms of contrasts so common in his letters: ‘True life and immortality belonged to Christ the Lord, while God’s wrath incarnate, sexual pleasure and eternal death, belonged to Aphrodite’ (2014:559).

²⁴ Gaca 2003:138 suggests that Paul’s atypical fervent and innovative sexual morality in (what she calls) a Hellenistic Jewish background, can be explained by two reasons: his extreme zeal for God, which manifested even before his turn to Jesus Christ (*Gal.* 1:13–14, *Phil.* 3:5), and his reclassifying of Gentiles as Israel and abhorrence of polytheistic sexual mores akin to scriptural, prophetic antipathy towards Israel’s fornication in service of other gods. See Reno (2021) for criticism of Gaca’s position (2003:146–152, at 151) that ‘Paul’s conception of sexual fornication refers to sexual intercourse for the most part marital but outside of the institution of marriage in the Lord.... He finds such relations immoral because they are religiously diversifying, not because they are extramarital’. Reno 2021:166 counters that ‘[f]or Paul, *πορνεία* connotes that excessive desire, that passionate disorder, that lack of self-control ubiquitously associated with sex workers and their clients, and it does so irrespective of any of the above orientations that sexual activity may take’.

²⁵ Philo *Spec. Leg.* 4.78, also on οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις, shares Paul’s uneasiness with desire as in *Rom.* 7:7 and 13:9, a concern found among other contemporaries, too: 4 *Macc.* 2:6: ‘the law says that we must not have desires (μὴ ἐπιθυμεῖν)’ contrary to God; *Didache* 3.3: ‘My child, do not become one who lusts (μὴ γίνεσθε ἐπιθυμητής)’ against God’s will. This sense of ἐπιθυμία and cognates correlates with *Num.* 11:34, *Ps.* 105:14–15, *Mt.* 5:27–28, *John* 8:44, *Hermas Vis.* 1.1.8, 1.2.4, *Ignatius Ad Pol.* 5.2; see Gaca 2003:153. The consistent goal of

The concern is at least partly framed by his Greco-Roman as well as his Second Temple Jewish contexts. At the same time, Paul did not promote, or even indicate knowledge of the Pythagorean-based notion, found among Philo and others, that the only permissible sex is for procreation within marriage (Gaca 2014:557). As we will see, and with marriage indeed providing the setting for legitimate sex, spouses were compelled to attend to each other's sexual needs with the purpose of curtailing lust and desire (1 *Cor.* 7:2–5).²⁶ With a moral interest rather than aiming to understand human physiology, Paul's concern was to eliminate desire and its adverse consequences, if need be, through marital sex—the latter does not appear to have been a problem in itself.

Rebellious sin punished in uncontrollable desire

Rom. 1:18–32 provides an account of why God gave people over to their desires, a core concern of the passage. The central argument is found in 1:24–27:

Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς· 25 οἵτινες μετέλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει... 26 διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας... 27 ...ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους.

Therefore, God gave them over in the *desires* of their hearts to impurity, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 those who exchanged the truth of God for a lie...26 for this reason, God gave them over to the *passions* of dishonor...27...in their *passion* they were inflamed for one another.

In his argument, Paul follows his Jewish traditions in emphasising a ‘monolatrous code of behaviour’ rather than bloodline for determining membership in the Jesus community. However, since the Gentiles in general, and Greeks in particular, brought God's people into a polytheistic environment, they have received God's wrath. Unlike the Jewish Scriptures where God's wrath meant the violence of invasion by foreign armies, Paul shifts gear and sees God's wrath descending upon the (imprecisely defined) Greek defectors through the ‘psychological violence of dishonoring sexual passions that were integral to any and all sexual mores involved in worshipping other gods’ (Gaca 2014:556).²⁷ While Jewish concern with a

early Christian ethics would become the ‘limitation of desire for things, experiences, and pleasures, “thou shall not desire”’; Stowers 2003:546.

²⁶ ‘Suggesting that “the saints” were freed from desire, having enslaved their “members” to God, Paul could further claim that gentiles are necessarily slaves to desire. Sexualized othering and community definition went hand in hand, a tradition that continued in later Christian discourse’; Knust 2006:87.

²⁷ The early Christian church fathers would go one further step, holding that only marital

generalised sense of Gentile life was not uncommon,²⁸ contemporary Greek and Roman philosophers, and the Stoics in particular, emphasised the need for self-mastery (ἐγκράτεια; also *Gal.* 5:23) and criticised its lack (ἀκρασία; also 1 *Cor.* 7:5) as foolishness.²⁹

Paul was particularly concerned about the intensity of the passions or desires, which makes them uncontrollable. Where positive references to ἐπιθυμία are found in the Pauline letters (e.g., *Phil.* 1:23; 1 *Thees.* 2:17), they are not about sexual desire (Martin 1995:347) and can probably be compared to Platonist and Stoic emphasis on ἀπάθεια (‘passionlessness’ or ‘restraint’; ‘freedom from emotions’; cf. *LSJ*). In *Rom.* 1:18–32, Paul employs three different words to refer to desires or passions: ἐπιθυμία, πάθος, and ὀρέξις, the first two in the plural. Their descriptions, desires *of their hearts*,³⁰ passions *of dishonour*, and *inflamed by their passion*, already underscore their intensity, as is acutely clear in the third expression’s ‘being inflamed’ (ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν, *Rom.* 1:27).

reproductive sex was not a death-bearing act of Aphrodite worship. Clement of Alexandria, for example, although supporting Paul’s notion that unacceptable, religiously alien sexual desire was apostasy’s divine penalty, promoted strictly reproductive Christian marital sexual activity as the only legitimate form of sexual intercourse: *Clem. Al. Quis dives*, 25.4–6; *Protr.* 102.3; see Gaca 2014:558.

²⁸ As Boyarin 1998:460 points out, by the formation of the New Testament, extremely negative views of sexuality were rampant in Judaism, notwithstanding the commandment to propagate. On the other hand, ‘it is important to notice that ἀντάρκεια has become widely used, by people of many persuasions, most frequently without the intellectual or psychological baggage of Stoicism’; Malherbe 2014:334.

²⁹ Similar to the stance found in *Rom.* 1:21–28 (cf. Stowers 2003:529), where Paul’s views correspond to those of the Stoics, for whom ἀκρασία, ‘following their monist cosmology, instead of accounting for it as a war between faculties of corporeal desiring and transcendent reasoning, they conceived of it as a cognitive problem of understanding, which to be set right needed a capacity for true perception’ (Maier 2019:196). Cf. also Martin 1995b:214: ‘The medical writers recognized, that is, that desire posed many dangers to the body, especially to weak bodies, and that too much desire could lead to all sorts of illnesses’. The four prominent ‘broad systems’, or main philosophical schools associated with Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Epicurus, not only shared a hierarchical view of the self, with the soul as the centre of intelligence located in or linked to the body, and with the soul primarily connected to mental and moral faculties; in all four, ἐγκράτεια as the control of passions and desires was of primary importance; cf. Maier 2019:192.

³⁰ The phrase ‘desires (or lusts) of their hearts’ is found in *Num.* 15:39, and the *Damascus Document* uses it to describe Israel’s history in terms of sexual misbehaviour, Loader 2010:16. Loader 2010:78–79 emphasises Paul’s concern with desires, which at times extend beyond sexual desire to include a spectrum of bodily desires or the reign of sin; however, his reliance on Ellis’ (2007) theologically apologetic claims which in turn are based on Greek romantic novels, that Paul only condemned excessive or misplaced desire, sees Loader (2010:46–47) invoking arguments from silence in an attempt to explain away Paul’s vitriol against desire in 1 *Cor.* 7.

Explaining Paul's concern with ἐπιθυμία as only the outflow of his (Greek) biblical background and his intention not to transgress God's laws (Gaca 2003:157), rather than also sharing Plato's irrational ἐπιθυμία and/or the Stoics' excessive ἐπιθυμία, seems forced. This also fails to honour the Pauline differentiation between sex as not necessarily perverted and desire as per definition evil. Desire was defiled, apparently because it was the result of earlier 'convictional defilement' in the form of not recognising God's divinity (*Rom. 1*).³¹

On the other hand, Paul did combine 'use' with 'natural' in describing the curtailing (or even absence) of passion, as one of the three contemporary forms of natural sex: procreative sex, sex preserving male superiority, and sex devoid of passion (Frederickson 2000:205–6). The natural experience of sexual desire was often treated in the Greco-Roman world as analogous to the natural experience of hunger since both were to be limited by satisfaction: sexual satisfaction and the full stomach were of a kind. Conversely, gluttony as much as unconstrained sexual activity were unnatural because indulging in excess meant loss of control, which would lead to brutality and disorder — sexual excess and gluttony were of a kind (see Frederickson 2000:199; Martin 1995a:344, 346; Swancutt 2004:62 n.101; 64–65).

Desires are also flagged elsewhere in the Pauline letters. Following a list of virtues (the fruit of the Spirit, *Gal. 5:22*), emphasising that none of those elements is against the Law, *Gal. 5:24* notes that οἱ δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ [Ἰησοῦ] τὴν σάρκα ἐσταύρωσαν σὺν τοῖς παθήμασιν καὶ ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις / 'Those of Christ (Jesus) crucified the flesh with its passions and desires'. Listing the passions and desires in addition to 'the flesh' is not to separate but to emphasise them together. The point is that Paul's problem seems not to have been primarily with sex but rather with desire. This is not to divorce the two from one another; however, to equate them means to lose focus of Paul's concern with unbridled and uncontrolled desire. Desire, which Paul portrays as virtually uncontrollable in male same-sex attraction, follows from the misrecognition of God and would give rise to inevitable unnatural sexual behaviour.

Bodily holiness vs sexual immorality: the value of sex

Paul's concern with desire extends to seeing regular, marital sex as a measure for dealing with lust and temptation. Whether or not Paul proposed marriage as

³¹ Unlike with Paul, desire could be morally neutral but 'the mastery of the self (with focus on desire and passion) became a masculine trait which had to be won and maintained because of the ever present possibility that one could always lose it as well' (Swancutt 2003:201–203).

antidote to sexual passion (so Martin 2006:57–59), he certainly shared alarm about unchecked passions with the ancient world.³² 1 *Cor.* 7:5 reads,

μη ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους, εἰ μήτι ἂν ἐκ συμφώνου πρὸς καιρόν, ἵνα σχολάσητε τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ἦτε, ἵνα μὴ πειράζη ὑμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν ὑμῶν.

Do not withhold yourselves from one another except perhaps by agreement for a while, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; and then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through your lack of self-control.

Sexual immorality is problematic, but the primary problem here is desire or temptation which impinges on self-control.³³ Desire is the main problem, which leads to the secondary problem of sexual immorality. To contend that in 1 *Cor.* 7, '[t]he issue, quite clearly, is sex, and the effects of sexual deprivation' (Moss and Baden 2015:172) is to miss Paul's point: desire is the issue, and marital sex is the way to address the issue; sexual deprivation is problematic not in itself, but because it exacerbates desire.

To be sure, along with philosopher contemporaries like Musonius (cf. *Frg.* 12), Paul believed that for married people, extra-marital sexual relations were dishonourable.³⁴ In 1 *Cor.* 6:18–19, Paul writes about the body as holy and a temple (cf. 2 *Cor.* 6:16):

18 φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν. πᾶν ἁμάρτημα ὃ ἐὰν ποιήσῃ ἄνθρωπος ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν· ὁ δὲ πορνεύων εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα ἁμαρτάνει. 19 ἢ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι τὸ σῶμα ὑμῶν ναὸς τοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν ἁγίου πνεύματός ἐστιν οὗ ἔχετε ἀπὸ θεοῦ, καὶ οὐκ ἐστὲ ἐαυτῶν;

18 Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the sexually immoral man/fornicator sins against his own body.

³² Martin 1995a:293 n.56 argues that it was a minority of Greco-Roman authors who contemplated the complete absence of desire in marriage. Frederickson 2000:197–222 puts more emphasis on the ancients' concern to control desire. Deming 2004 challenges Martin's position on the ground that excessive passion and not desire in itself was challenged both by Paul and the Stoics.

³³ The concern underlying Paul's instruction in 1 *Cor.* 7:5 is not primarily about, beyond incest or adultery, also sexual fornication as surrender to Satan and therefore unconditionally forbidden and rebellious, so Gaca 2003:139, but about excising desire in order to avoid sexual immorality.

³⁴ In marriage, the emphasis was on honour, kindness, and affection, rather than sensual pleasure. Some philosophers warned against getting married for dishonourable reasons, e.g., Musonius *Frg.* 13b, Plut. *Amat. Narr.* 754; cf. Ps-Arist. *Oecon.* 3.23–25. See also Malherbe 2014:590.

19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and you are not your own?

Here Paul makes a distinction between sexual and other sins, with sexual immorality described as sinning against one's own body. Other transgressions are also wrong, such as believers litigating against one another in pagan courts (1 *Cor.* 6:18, cf. 1 *Cor.* 6:1–11) but since they are outside of the body, they are not as menacing as sexual transgressions (Gaca 2003, 144). From the text, it is not clear why other bodily transgressions such as drunkenness or over-eating are not noted as sinning against the body, but this may have been because of the absence of sensual desire.

Dale Martin argues that for Paul marriage was the way by which desire could be extinguished. 'Paul believed that it was not only possible but preferable, in fact, necessary that Christians experience sexual intercourse only within the context of marriage and only in the absence of sexual passion and desire' (Martin 1997:202). But even if Martin drives the point too far, clearly legitimate, or marital sex provided an acceptable conduit for managing desire, an outlet of sorts. In fact, not only is marital sexual intercourse legitimate, but as far as Paul is concerned, sex can have a sanctifying effect.³⁵ The argument of 1 *Cor.* 7:14 stresses the beneficial impact of sex for an unbelieving spouse with a believing spouse, and their children:

ἡγιάσται γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἄπιστος ἐν τῇ γυναικί καὶ ἡγιάσται ἡ γυνὴ ἡ ἄπιστος ἐν τῷ ἀδελφῷ· ἐπεὶ ἅρα τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν ἀκάθαρτά ἐστιν, νῦν δὲ ἅγια ἐστιν.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her husband. Otherwise, your children are unclean, but now they are holy.³⁶

³⁵ Sex did not defile, not even with the sex-worker (1 *Cor.* 6:15–16), where becoming one with her is the problem, not defiling sex. Sex certainly did not defile a non-believer (1 *Cor.* 7:12–14), but to the contrary would sanctify such as in the case of the unbelieving marital partner, and the children born from their sexual intercourse in particular. Such sentiments differ from Jewish views, where purification rites were in order after sex and before participation in liturgical events, though these are shorter in duration and therefore less defiling than, *e.g.*, for touching a corpse.

³⁶ Gaca 2014:556: 'Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 extends a special dispensation to already formed polytheistic marriages that promised to become fully Christian through the conversion of one spouse to Christianity. This promise arose because converted spouses learned, as part of their catechism, that they must strive to win for Christ alone their entire family, including their still polytheistic spouses'. Similarly, in early Christianity, with Ignatius (37–107 CE) distinguishing between marriages between believers (γάμος κατὰ κύριον), carrying the bishops' sanction, and religiously syncretistic marriages (*Ep.ad Pol.* 5.2); see also Hermas *Vis.* 1.3.1–2, Tert. *Ad ux.* 2.7.

A similar sentiment may be present in 1 *The*s. 4:3–5:

ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας, 4 εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκευὸς κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἀγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, 5 μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν θεόν.

that you abstain from unchastity; 4 that each one of you know how to obtain control of his vessel in holiness and honour, 5 not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God.

In general, regardless of whether τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκευὸς κτᾶσθαι refers to a man getting a wife or exercising control over his genitals, Paul's concern, and agreement with contemporary authors that sex belongs in marriage, is clear.³⁷ But Paul also connected sanctification and the avoidance of immorality. If, in fact, the phrase refers to control over sexual organs, more than just promoting good sexual morals, Paul comes close to suggesting that proper sex is sanctified and sanctifying.³⁸ Such sentiments correspond with his argument in 1 *Cor*. 7 as well. Here too, Paul's concern is with desire, rather than sexual acts. Using stereotypical slander, believers are encouraged to live their sexual lives μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας (not in passion of desire), a sentiment shared by Stoic contemporaries, for whom desire was an irrational, intemperate movement of the soul, a craving opposed to reason.³⁹

³⁷ Reading πρᾶγμα in 1 *The*s. 4:6a (τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ) as referring to inner-community adulterous relationships (e.g., 'that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter' RSV) rather than defrauding others 'in business', may force the point, and leaves out consideration that sexual and wealth-related desire were often considered to be of a kind. Paul is ambivalent about wealth, cf., e.g., 2 *Cor*. 9:8, as was the deutero-Pauline tradition (e.g., 1 *Tim*. 6:17–19). Of course, if v4 is understood as bodily (genital) self-control, this phrase could also refer to cheating fellow-believers in sexual matters; so Oropeza 2012:53.

³⁸ Some scholars who hold to the conventional (but no longer only) translation of τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκευὸς κτᾶσθαι as getting a wife, argue for an elevated understanding of marriage, e.g., 'what distinguishes Paul is that the marriage relationship is defined from a religious perspective, as sanctification, which is what would have been new to his Gentile converts'; Malherbe 2014:590; see however, Smith 2001. Akin to Martin's argument on passionless marital sex in 1 *Cor*. 7, Frederickson 2003:23–30 makes a similar argument for 1 *The*s. 4:4–5.

³⁹ Malherbe 2014:590 rightly emphasises that 'Paul does not attribute it [= lust] to a psychological deficiency, a lack of discipline properly exercised by reason' like contemporary Stoics would, 'but interprets the condition theologically, as due to ignorance of God'. However, this explanation goes beyond the text's own claims as well as context, with sanctification amounting here to something else than shunning idolatry. In any case, Paul 'proposes a model of family and union with God that exists outside of the structures of biological procreation'; Moss and Baden 2015:191.

The collective body features sexually for Paul also in the sense that for him non-permissible sex destroys the believer's association with the body of Christ.⁴⁰ Paul condemns sexual immorality unconditionally (e.g., 1 *Cor.* 6:18, 10:8; 1 *Thess.* 4:3; and see 1 *Cor.* 5:1–5) and includes it in vice lists (*Gal.* 5:19–21), a practice followed in the deutero-Pauline tradition (*Col.* 3:5, 2 *Cor.* 12:20–1, *Eph.* 5:3–5 and 1 *Tim.* 1:9–10; cf. Gaca 2003:139). Paul's blanket condemnation of non-marital or desire-filled sex differs from the Pentateuch's distinctions between various forms of sexual immorality, as seen in the commensurate variations in punishment.⁴¹ Paul can vent angrily about various situations where, at the face of it, non-permissible sex was the problem. But this would be to miss the point: it is the lust that invokes the sexual activity that is the real problem, and the inevitable consequences of acting upon desire. Sex and desire have always been part of society at large, and as such have also informed society. In the ancient Greek and Roman context, cities' needs related to population, family, and continuity provided by married sexuality, while an emerging, new religion such as incipient Christianity promoted discontinuity and change which included the renunciation of sexuality—the latter amounted to the renunciation of society as it was. The sexual austerity among early followers of Jesus as much as early Christianity was not, as it is often portrayed, primarily a reaction against Greek and Roman debauchery, but had to do with changes in contemporary perceptions of the body itself. In Paul early signs of the change in views on the body and sex are visible. As Brown (1988:6–32) explains of what would in the end become a sweeping change, the shift was not from less to more oppressive social attitudes but a changed understanding of the body. While serious Roman Stoics wanted to regulate the body like a well-ordered city rather than change it, early Christianity wanted to transform their bodies to make them holy.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. 1 *Cor.* 3:16–17: οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι ναὸς θεοῦ ἐστε καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ οἰκεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν; ¹⁷εἴ τις τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φθειρεῖ, φθερεῖ τοῦτον ὁ θεός· ὁ γὰρ ναὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἅγιός ἐστιν, οὐτινὲς ἐστε ὑμεῖς / 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are'.

⁴¹ The contrast is explained variously, e.g., Gaca 2003:139: 'Paul does not distinguish between degrees of disobedient sexual fornication ... because he is struggling to teach Christians that they must protect themselves and their children at all costs from the sexual and re-productive conduits of other-theistic worship that pervade their social world'.

⁴² Understandably, as sexual renunciation implied social disinvestment in the anchorite communities in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, Christians' bodies ceased to belong to the public body of the state, so that asceticism contributed to the separation between state and individual and in this way introduced somewhat of a Christian revolution in freedom; cf. Brown 1988:5–17.

*Conclusion*⁴³

My point here is not to claim that the stance on desire and sex in the Pauline letters (or other New Testament documents) simply copies ancient or contemporary sexual ethics, even if many ‘Christian’ attitudes towards sexuality grew close to pagan roots (Brown 1988:33–57).⁴⁴ In scathing criticism of Nussbaum’s (1994) notion that ancient moral philosophy and Stoicism (with a touch more compassion) offer a method and useful concepts for modern ethics, Martin protests against any attempt to read modern ethics ‘simplistically from the Bible’ as nostalgic and naive (Martin 1997:212). Martin vociferously criticises her for thinking that the ancients’ ‘therapeutic system can be divorced from the negative aspects of its ideological assumptions’. Martin even holds that in Paul’s time the much-vaunted aristocratic ideal of self-sufficiency depended on slavery and exploitation, secured by ideological and wilful ignorance of both these systems and their role in enabling aristocratic choices.⁴⁵

⁴³ A number of related aspects could not be discussed here, due to a lack of space, including gender (and especially masculinity) and desire, the politics of desire; clothing and desire; and, also desire and ambivalence. Another crucial aspect is the ‘development’ of emotions as psychological category during the nineteenth century, distinguishing emotions from categories such as appetites, passions, sentiments, and affections (Dixon 2003). Recently the development of emotions over time has attracted attention; see, *e.g.*, Reddy 2001; Knuuttila 2004; Gross 2008; Frevert 2011; Plamper 2015; Boddice 2018; Rosenwein and Cristiani 2018; Barclay, Crozier-De Rosa, and Stearns 2021. Two very recent studies (Diersen 2022; Rächle, Page and Goldbeck (Hrsg.) 2022) on emotions and connections to politics in the ancient world appeared too late to be accounted for here.

⁴⁴ What Maier 2019:195 argues for the use of desire and reason in ethical decision-making, ‘Paul shares a discourse of ethical training with his contemporaries, but it is built into a new formulation that results in a transposition of a pre-existing tradition to an eschatological framework located in an assembly of believers’, can probably be expanded to Paul’s negotiation of the sex and desire tension. And of course, ‘early Christianity’s rhetoric foists upon the terminologies of Graeco-Roman erotic love, radicalising these terminologies by interiorisation’; Vorster 2005:740. Elaine Pagels 1989:4 argues that early Christianity found in the Genesis accounts of temptation and the Fall a revolutionary theme. Developments among those who initiated what would become Christianity, did not only see a focus on freedom that emerged in early Christian thought but also a rich diversity of expression of that very freedom; see, *e.g.*, Brown 1988:5–25. The linking of prophecy to continence developed among some such as dualists and Encratites into an insistence to avoid intercourse in order to bring an end to the propagation and continuation of the pagan world. Others, such as Clement, saw in marriage a way to preserve society, and that Stoic Romans who married Christian women would grow from a married life which included sexual intercourse to a serene, celibate old age; cf. Brown 1988:92–102.

⁴⁵ For challenges to Martin’s views, see, *e.g.*, Bosman 2015:16–28 and Desmond’s contention (2006:169) that ‘a Greek praise of poverty long preceded the Cynics themselves’. As to relevance, while Martin 1997:210 holds that ‘from a Christian point of view, and I

In fact, while Paul's uncompromising stance towards sexual morality may have been radically new to his contemporaries and his 'innovative sexual rules precipitated a sharp and irreconcilable divide between ancient Greek sexual politics, philosophical and popular alike, and Christian sexual politics in devotion to God alone through Christ' (Gaca 2003:293), this context and such tensions frame Paul's anti-desire, pro-sex stance.⁴⁶ The ancient Greeks and Romans were aware that, along with beauty, desire also 'can be said to conquer the beholder, even an emperor' (Stansbury-O'Donnell 2014:51).⁴⁷ Paul, through his letters, often receives the dubious honour of a (or even, *the*) founding figure of Christianity, complete with doctrines and morals. The conventional view that Christianity, and Paul in particular, introduced sexual repression in the free Roman world, is a misrecognition that confuses Paul's views of sex with his stance on desire.⁴⁸ Reading Paul in line with a Platonist notion of sex as an act of mercy is more appropriate than to read Paul in line with Augustine's notion of sexuality's inherent sinfulness and sex as punishment.⁴⁹

think this not just Paul's view, self-sufficiency is neither possible nor desirable', Von Thaden 2012:299–301 goes along a different route and insists on rendering a meaningful reading of Pauline instructions in *I Cor.* without claiming that this constitutes a useful reading today where different social values prevail.

⁴⁶ However, in the case of Paul, it is probably too much and too early to say that '[w]e can see that by taking up themes from other philosophical and ethical traditions and integrating them with a new eschatology centred in Christ's death and resurrection, there is a transposition of philosophical concepts from a Greco-Roman to a Christian mental world'; Maier 2019:205.

⁴⁷ 'Roman attitudes to sex and viewing also differ from those of the Greeks, particularly when it comes to the importance accorded to social class and power'; Stansbury-O'Donnell 2014:49. Classical Athenian assumptions about social class and sexual behaviour, where sexuality was linked to civic identity and gender boundaries were fluid, were comically exploited in Aristophanes' plays. In later Roman satire such as Juvenal's attack on homoerotic men (II.19–21), those used as examples in the latter part of the poem openly walk around in women's clothing, take part in women's cult activities, and even marry each other; Rosen and Keane 2014:393.

⁴⁸ Although passion may blur the boundaries at times. The choice of method but especially of perspective, is important and is evident among scholars of antiquity too. Although it is a debate about a later period, Peter Brown and Elaine Pagels both identify the significance of asceticism in early Christianity. However, while for Brown (1988:208–209) the victory of ascetics (*e.g.*, Jerome) over advocates of married sexual expression (*e.g.*, Jovinian) was a victory of sexual repression over moderate forces of sexual acceptance, for Pagels 1989:88 the ascetics achieved victory over the moderates' attempt to 'sanction traditional pagan values', which aligned with the Christian aspiration of freedom from social constraints. See recently also Sowers and Passaro 2020:185–196 on the promotion of the ascetic ideal in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

⁴⁹ Cf. August. *De bono coniugali* and *De sancta virginitate* and *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum II: De nuptiis et concupiscentia* on desire as disease and as punishment while

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shielding marriage from similar accusations; see also Grahn-Wilder 2018:20–21. Loader 2010:25 warns that posing any reliance of Paul on Plato is speculative.

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