



CHAPTER

17 Pauline Letters

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Abstract

This chapter presents key terms and concepts in the study of ancient gender and sexuality. It outlines how knowledge of the terms and concepts' historical developments as well as their internal relations in Pauline usage is essential in order to grasp Paul's positions and his own praxis. It also demonstrates how issues of gender and sexuality are part of the core of Pauline theology. Rather than continuing the discussions of asceticism versus marriage in Pauline literature, the article suggests that a more recent term borrowed from gender studies, "intimacies," may give new insights—not least into how Paul describes his own relationships to his most Significant Other(s). Key examples are Paul's discussions of penises, foreskins, and circumcision and their attached privileges (hierarchy or equality? Galatians 3–4), and the role of asceticism (1 Corinthians). The chapter also includes a survey of how Paul describes his closest male and female partners.

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GENDER is a basic and largely transhistorical structuring and categorization device for human bodies, language, social roles—and also theology. Although the English language has developed in extension of Indo-European languages where grammatical gender is fundamental, English has rid itself of gender as a way of categorizing nouns and adjectives. This linguistic development shows that it is possible to stop or fundamentally alter the attribution of gender to bodies, things, words, or metaphysical entities. And yet, as unthinkable as it would be to analyze and understand human bodies without any reference to gender, so also is it unthinkable to analyze and understand biblical texts or other theological corpora beyond any gender categorization—at least for the time being. In addition, for roughly the last 150–200 years, Western societies have also understood themselves using categories of "sexuality." This means that while "gender" and "sexuality" may be lined up side by side in modern presentations of identity and as variables in intersectional analysis, here the two will be employed historically-conceptually as belonging to different historical and epistemic layers—since the former is found in all ancient materials while the latter is a categorization we use to comprehend, label, and analyze both the present and ancient texts.

It is the modern world that guides our analysis and questioning; thus the analysis is not complete until we have brought the two worlds together and reflected on our own role as analysts and interpreters in staging an encounter between different periods and different worlds. The desire to make structures found in the biblical texts normative today, or to criticize them, belongs to the realm of theology and/or feminist theological critique. But additionally, it is useful to understand the gender structures in the texts on their own terms in order to appreciate how intimately they are woven into the texts' most basic structures of

meaning. Gender in the Pauline letters is not “extra,” additional, external to the theological message, or of interest only to modern women. Rather, it is impossible to understand Paul fully without reckoning with the fact that he lived and wrote within a world where genitalia and gender categories were basic building blocks for articulating strategies of salvation.

p. 316 Thus this chapter will examine relevant Pauline texts, analyzing how they engage gender and sexuality on a much wider variety of levels than are readily apparent on the basis only of Paul’s explicit ideas. Here I am interested especially in how the texts interact with *models* of gender in culture and language. In addition, by tracing in a rudimentary fashion the reception history of Paul’s sayings on women and gender and also reflecting on the language I use to describe Paul’s fellow Christians and their internal relationships, I will expose how our understanding of ancient gender has become (too) dependent on more recent models and categories. Apropos of this point, since “sexuality”—with its distinction between homo- and heterosexuality as two very different forms of desire and personality—is a modern conceptual cluster (Halperin 2002), I suggest that it is problematic to use it in analyses of close relationships within early Christianity. Instead, I find recent theories of “intimacies” (a more open term, which in gender research is preferred over against the more fixed term “family”) to be better suited to understanding how Paul presents and represents his closest significant other(s), opening up the possibility that his relationships to them could take many different and fluid forms (Frank et al. 2013; Weeks et al. 2001; for the importance of narratives for intimacies, see Van Vleet 2008).¹ Such theories can help us move past the conventional patterns of intimacies in our own times—that is, marriage, nuclear family, civil partnerships, and so forth—and see other possibilities and patterns in the texts.

Classification Systems of Gender and Sexuality at Work in Paul’s Letters

While concepts and categories related to “gender” and “sexuality” may have been less fixed prior to modernity, the grouping of people on the basis of their genitalia and their preferences of desire and age is not new. Unlike the male collective terms *anthrōpos* and *anēr*, in ancient Greek there was no collective, common designation for females. People born in a female body had little more in common than that. *Gynē* is often translated “woman,” but the two words are not semantically equivalent, nor is *gynē* semantically parallel to *anēr* (man) in ancient Greek usage. *Anthrōpos*, though designating the collective human being, is often used as a synonym to *anēr*, whereas *anthrōpos* is never used synonymously with *gynē*. Neither was there a female equivalent noun to *anthrōpos*. One talked about “the wives of ...” or used similar expressions, which has led Nicole Loraux to state that “female Athenians do not exist” (1993: 114, 116ff., 247).

Even though *gynē* is usually translated “woman,” there was no separate word for “wife,” as there is in many other languages. The Greek usage is not fully consistent, but there seems to be a tendency such that, while “newly married woman,” “daughter,” “whore,” “slave” or “servant girl,” “widow,” and so on were, to a lesser extent, different *roles* that a *gynē* could play, a *gynē* was, most basically, a wife. Put in modern parlance, the role essentializes; in other words, sexual status completely defined female gendered individuals, whereas a man was a man and could have various roles and sexual statuses (Økland 2004: 14). When *gynē* is also used as the main, collective designation for those of female gender—and therefore has to be translated “woman”—it is because “wife” was the paradigmatic and privileged modus of female genderedness of which the other realizations were imperfect, distorted, or potential versions. In a similar vein, mixed-gender gatherings could be addressed in grammatical masculine form even if women were present, because the masculine was the paradigmatic and privileged human of which the feminine was an imperfect or secondary version (Loraux 1993).

In Paul’s letters, there are many examples of language referring to gender and sexual status, although modern translations often tone these down because of concerns around inclusivity:

- use of the term “brother” or “son” to address mixed-gender gatherings, most clearly in the introductory exhortations of the Pauline letters—e.g., Rom 1:13; 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 1:8; Gal 1:11; Phil 1:14—and more generally throughout—e.g., Rom 8:14; Gal 3:26; Gal 4:6 (see discussion of this phenomenon in Boyarin 1995, including also the important response from Karen King; for a different approach, cf. Osiek 1992).
- other examples of male collective address to the *ekklēsia*i, even if these communities also included

We also see that Paul's letters (especially 1 Corinthians) directly address people's sexual statuses and sexual lifestyles:

- examples of separate discussions of females of different sexual statuses: *parthenoi* (virgins), wives, and so forth, in 1 Corinthians 7:25–38; *pornai* (prostitutes) in 1 Corinthians 6:15; married *gynaikes* (wives) in Romans 7:2 and 1 Corinthians 7:2–4. Scholars have also debated whether a difference in sexual status might be a way of explaining the apparent contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul takes for granted that women pray and prophesy in the *ekklēsia*, and 1 Corinthians 14, where he demands that they keep silent. According to this argument, 1 Corinthians 11 would refer to unmarried virgins and 1 Corinthians 14 to wives. Given that there is no differentiation in terminology (*gynē* is used in both passages), this is not very likely (see survey of the various options in Økland 2004: 9–10, 202).
- the discussion in 1 Corinthians 5 of how the community should relate to a man currently living with his father's *gynē* (note the ambiguity of the term, as discussed earlier); to Paul, this is an abominable form of sexual transgression, although the precise circumstances are not clear. Is the father dead? absent? are the *gynē* and the son the same age? and so on (Wire 1990: 74, 78). In the same chapter, Paul warns the Corinthians to distance themselves from community members living as *pornoi*—that is, who live in a way that transgresses sociosexual conventions. In addition to its Greek meanings describing and relating to extramarital forms of ↴ sexuality, the root *porn-* was also used in a general, derogatory sense by Jewish authors to denote most of what was wrong with the gentiles, including not only sex that transgressed the rules of the Torah but also idolatry, theft, and greediness.
- the criticism of men making the body of Christ, that is, the *ekklēsia*, impure by becoming “one flesh” with a *pornē* (prostitute) in 1 Corinthians 6; in this case also, the circumstances are unclear. Paul does not clarify in which sense these women were *pornai*: were they sex slaves, did they sell sex for money or favors, or were they just sexually available? (Moxnes 2003; Økland 2003)

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Unity, Equality, Hierarchy (Galatians)

In Galatians 3–4, Paul reflects on issues of universality, sameness, and difference—with the remnants of an early Christian baptismal formula or “confession” in 3:26–29 as focal point. This passage is generally celebrated in the post-Enlightenment West as the declaration of the fundamental unity in Christ. Paul says here that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” Still, the Galatians are addressed in the masculine form, which, according to ancient standards, was the representative form for the group as a whole; this is explicit in 3:26 where the recipients are called *huiioi* (“sons”), but nowhere is it clearer than in the conclusion of this passage, v. 29: “for all of you are *one* in Christ Jesus” (emphasis added).² Although Paul addresses the “sons,” this does not exclude women outright, because women were also invisibly subsumed within the collective male terms and hence “brothers” and “sons” of God in Christ (cf. Boyarin 1995).

Early in the history of gender-critical exegesis, Wayne Meeks suggested that Galatians 3:26–28 was a quote from an early baptismal ritual that Paul simply cites and then interprets (1974; developed in Schüssler-Fiorenza 1983: 194). The “male and female” thus refers to the bisexual progenitor of the human race, developed by early Christians into a concept of eschatological restoration of the original androgyne, Adam, in Christ (Meeks 1974: 208). Therefore the formula seems to be included not because of its authority, per se, but because it is useful for Paul's immediate purposes and because there might be some need to interpret it to new believers. Paul also appears to quote a shorter form of the formula in 1 Corinthians 12:13. But in this context, he removes any reference to gender, perhaps because he did not want to evoke what “no longer male and female” might mean to the Corinthians (Wire 1990: 137).³

Paul also expresses the idea that all are one, all are elect, in his choice of terminology: he calls the groups in his network *ekklēsiai*, derived from the Greek term for selecting or calling out. Thus, like the democratic institutions of ancient Athens and the *qahal* of the Israelites, the *ekklēsia* is the gathering of the elect, but with two key differences: first, in the Pauline *ekklēsiai* women can also be fully part without a sexual impediment (an expression ↴ from Catholic doctrine, unfolded in gender-critical terms in Børresen 2015); second, now everyone is potentially elect!

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Since the French Revolution, this message has been interpreted not only as one of unity but also increasingly as one of *unity in equality* and equal worth: not only are we all one in Christ, but we are also equal in Christ and have equal worth. Yet the term “unity” has not been interpreted this way through most of Christian history. Even a strict hierarchical system can preach and practice strong internal unity with mutual dependence between those high up and those lower down in the hierarchy and a unified front toward an external enemy. For this reason, it did not occur to earlier commentators to use Galatians 3:26–29 with respect to questions of women’s authority when this became an issue. The passage was used instead to argue that women actually reflect the image of God together with men (cf. the image of the androgyne discussed earlier). To put this in terms of conceptual philosophical analysis, unity and equality are not the same concept and cannot stand in for one another. Unity can be based on equality, but it can also be based on hierarchy. Paul knew the term *isotēs* (equality or balance) and uses it in 2 Corinthians 8:13–14. In Colossians, a disputed Pauline, the concept is intimately linked with what is just and righteous (4:1). But Paul does not invoke it in Galatians 3.

In the modern period, as understandings of the relation between unity, equality, and hierarchy have changed, Galatians 3:26–29 has become an important point of departure—first for Christian feminist theology and eventually for a broader Christian embrace of an ideology of gender equality. Thus the passage has helped to bring an end to theological arguments for the legitimacy of gender discrimination in many churches—though of course that has not stopped the practice of discrimination. There are, however, problems with this modern interpretation. For one, it already presupposes unity as sameness—and thus gives preference not only to one particular understanding of unity (i.e., necessarily implying equality) but also to one particular notion of gender (i.e., strictly male and female and participating in one shared humanity without difference).

But unity can be based on different things; there are varying ways to understand sexual difference; and, to complicate matters further, there are also different kinds of equality:

- equality as sameness: two equal parts of one shared humanity; this understanding is the presupposition for the modern interpretation of Galatians 3:26–29.
- equality across difference: difference is crucial in most definitions of gender; yet notions of equal worth in spite of unsurmountable sexual differences do not necessarily presuppose equal rights: women can be subordinate yet considered to have equal worth on an abstract, metaphysical level. Other difference-based models of equality argue that precisely because women and men are fundamentally different from each other, they do not understand each other and/or they complement each other—thus they should have equal rights.

p. 320 Equality across differences might in principle be possible in the modern world; but in ancient texts without clear notions of equality and individual rights, it cannot be found. Thus the unity of the baptismal formula is most likely the unity of the body as expressed ↳ by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12: there is a unified hierarchy of body parts, where the weaker and lower need the higher and stronger. His model of unity is not based on equality but on hierarchy.

The Gospel of the Foreskin

Much of Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians centers around one small body part: the foreskin of the male penis—or the lack of such. Considering the size of this body part; the fact that only 50 percent of humans carry it; its nonvital role in reproduction and the functioning of the human body (doctors still discuss today whether it is healthier to keep the foreskin or to cut it off); and its invisibility in the daily life of the religious community—it is astonishing that Paul could spend so much time and space writing about it. While there may be reductionist, medical, and secular dimensions to this line of reasoning, in the context of critical sexuality studies, the point remains important (see Bordo 1993; cf. Boyarin 1992; Eilberg-Schwartz 1994).

The penis is also a crucial sexual organ; and yet, the vast scholarly contributions on Paul and circumcision have generally avoided the sexual connotations of the topic, at least until recently. The explanation both for Paul’s concern and for the absence of any scholarly discussion of sexuality only makes sense in theological terms: Paul was a Jew, and in Jewish religious thought circumcision was and is the sign, although concealed, of the pact between God and the people of Israel (see Gen 17)—to the extent that in Paul’s day it was a

contradiction in terms to speak about God's people if the sign that sealed and testified to this status was missing. In addition, the circumcised penis was potentially one of the most "tangible" and visible identity markers of Judaism, one that, in its usually veiled state, functioned as a symbol of unity for Jews around the inner Mediterranean basin and further away. It was surpassed only by the Temple—and, of course, the Torah itself, which contained the directions for both the building of the temple and for circumcision. For Paul, then, the status of the foreskin constituted a test case for whether or not one had understood the implications of the coming of Christ (Neutel 2015). Further, since Christian theology has been cautious to address male bodies and sexualities insofar as this might turn them into *objects* (see Eilberg-Schwartz 1994; also Neutel and Anderson 2014), the sexual aspects of Paul's interest in circumcision have generally been passed over in silence.

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Paul does not accept that he is nullifying the power of the law (Rom 3:31) or that what he says places him outside of the Jewish community (Rom 11:1). He does not deny that salvation comes from Israel, but maintains that through Israel the whole world will be saved. When his peers argued that they were the elect because they were the sons of Abraham, Paul concedes. But he goes on to present a creative, innovative reading of the story about Abraham's selection: Abraham became elect *with his foreskin intact*—that is, before any materialization of the pact with God (Gen 15:6). Only further on in the story (Gen 17) does God demand that Abraham and all males born in his household and bought with his money (i.e., slaves) be circumcised. The Torah is, so to speak, the "small print" ⁴ of the agreement and male circumcision its signature. Abraham's trust came before Abraham's pact. First trust (or "faith," as the term *pistis* is usually creatively translated), then the agreement, the law, and the signature (Rom 4:1–15). Thus circumcision is a consequence and not a foundation for the pact with God, and Paul reminds the Galatians in chapter 3 that faith came first also for them. Accordingly, if the men let themselves be circumcised, they commit themselves to *all* of the Torah.

Paul's creative rereading of his own tradition also has potential consequences for women—ones that he was quick to avert: if male circumcision is not foundational "in Christ" but only a consequence of a (still) special Jewish relationship with God, this could, in theory, place women on a more level playing field symbolically. While they could not remove any foreskin, they could have a special relationship with God. Thus, whereas in Paul's context gender hierarchy was grounded in the physical difference between male and female genitalia and the male given priority, attention, and care, when Paul seeks to abolish circumcision for Christians, by the same token, he also removes the physical grounding for male religious prerogative. We can conclude that this was an unintended effect from the fact that he immediately seeks to reground male religious priority in social custom and theology instead of in genitalia.⁴ In 1 Corinthians, he introduces his cosmic-theological hierarchy with women at the bottom, men in between women and Christ, and God on the top (11:1–3); he also seems to infer that the *logos* spread down through the same hierarchy, starting from God and reaching finally to the women (14:36). The consequences in terms of social mores such as dress code and speech habits underscore this hierarchy.

Galatians 2:1ff. gives Paul's own account of what in posterity has become known as "The Apostolic Meeting in Jerusalem." This was a clear step in the direction of formalizing the Jesus movement, and the foreskin was yet again at the center—because it gave rise to enormous tensions with regard to the vision and scope of the movement as a whole: should the movement operate among the circumcised only (by which was not meant just circumcised Jewish males but the entire Jewish population)? Or could members of "the foreskins"—that is, populations where the males had retained their foreskins—also become part of this new people of God? Here I am not trying to produce puns; rather I am simply translating the idioms of the Pauline and deuterio-Pauline letters, in which "foreskin," "circumcision," and similar terms from andrology come to stand in for population groups as wholes (Eph 2:11; cf. Rom 4:10, 1 Cor 7:18).

If "the foreskins" wanted to become part of the new creation (Gal 6:15), the new community of Christ believers, would they (i.e., their males) need to be circumcised? Paul vehemently opposed this, whereas many others, including the leaders of the Jesus-movement in Jerusalem and opponents in Galatia, said yes. To drive his point home, Paul brought along to the meeting a partner with intact foreskin, Titus, just to see how the other apostles would deal with him (Gal 2:1–3). We must hope that Titus was not forced to parade his uncircumcised penis around the meeting; just the rumor about it was probably enough to spread fear and disgust.

As Jewish gender critics of religion have pointed out with regard to modern Judaism,⁵ the centrality given to issues of penis, foreskin, and circumcision in religious formation and identity functions to marginalize

women's bodies from the core of the tradition—that is, from theological meaning-making. The same holds true for the formation of earliest Christianity: how the matter looked from the side of Galatian women, who were not circumcised anyway, we will never know. Still, it is important to incorporate their presence in our imagination of the *ekklēsia* and make space for what might have been their reflections on their own bodies, the men's bodies, and the *ekklēsia*'s body in our scholarly reconstructions—although we can never know exactly what these were like.

Female leadership was not unusual in the Jesus movement. Rituals were common and gender-inclusive, as Romans and 1 Corinthians witness. Since women did not have foreskins to begin with, they could, in theory, move much more freely between synagogue meetings and the gatherings of Christ-followers without causing offense in the way that Titus did. We further need to remember that at this very early stage, “synagogue” was not necessarily the designation of a building, but rather a group of people whose host/ess might well also be a Christ-believer.

In any event, the result of the apostolic meeting was a compromise, in which Paul got the acceptance he wanted regarding his responsibility for the “happy gospel (*euangelion*) of the foreskin” (direct translation of Gal 2:7), just as Peter was entrusted with the happy gospel of the circumcision. Paul accepted that Christ-believing Jews continued to observe the Torah on this point; and they accepted Paul's mission to the gentiles without circumcision as a requirement. In this way, Paul navigated, challenged, and reimagined what, according to Gen 17:14, was God's *eternal* pact with Abraham—surely the background against which we must understand his extraordinary preoccupation with foreskins and circumcision in Galatians and Romans.

Being Heir

As Paul himself closes Galatians 3 with “you are all *one* (masc.) ... you are Abraam's *sperma* (sperm, seed; NRSV: offspring) and heirs according to the promise (3:29), it is clear already at the start of chapter 4 that being an heir is closely connected to being male. Chapter 4 opens with a discourse on the *klēronomos*, the heir, who is male. This is explicit in the notion that we all receive *huiiothesia*, sonship (4:5).

In modern Bible translations that strive for inclusiveness, the “heir” in question here is not marked by gender, because in most modern countries women have as much right to inherit as men. Thus we are led to presume that the term *klēronomos* is also gender neutral. But this was not so in the ancient world. The argument in Galatians 4 hinges on a legal context that allowed male heirs only, as does the connection between chapter 3 and 4—that is, the connection between the discourse of the foreskin and the discourse on heritage, respectively. In this perspective, Paul uses the baptismal formula in 3:26–29 to secure for slaves, women, and those without the correct lineage a right of inheritance, religiously speaking.

Read text-internally, Galatians allows women to be present but essentially invisible in the text and in the community the text addresses. However, they do not challenge or even affect the way the community is represented or the topics under discussion. This is one of the reasons why I have made Galatians so prominent in this chapter—in order to demonstrate that issues of gender and sexuality are at the core of Paul's letters even when he does not address women and sexual practices as directly as he does in 1 Corinthians.

The story following in chapter 4 is a rather dark paraphrase on the brief Hebrew Bible account of Sara and her slave Hagar (Gen 16 and 21), and their sons by Abraham: Ishmael and Isaac.⁶ In spite of the fact that Sara first offers Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate mother for Sara and Abraham's child (an offer Hagar as her slave could not refuse) and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Paul uses the story to elaborate on the status differentiation between a son who is an heir (as the Christians in Christ) and the son of the slavewoman, who can never achieve such status.

Paul's letters have also been hailed as the gospel of asceticism, as a legitimation for breaking free from the reins of reproduction and material life (Økland 2008). An ascetic life meant at the time more autonomy for women, an escape route from the control of fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. That this interpretation was already close at hand in early Christianity, we can see from martyr and hero narratives such as the Acts of Thecla, in which Thecla gives up her fiancée to follow Paul in a sexually chaste way. The readers learn that fathers and husbands quickly get jealous and annoyed when their women run after Paul. It is not unlikely that this text represents some kind of window into the earliest reception of Paul and the social situations his letters engendered (Clark 1997; see also Kraemer, "Thecla" in this volume).

The Thecla story might or might not be inspired by 2 Corinthians 11:1–2, in which Paul sees himself as having married the Corinthians off to one husband, so that they can remain chaste virgins here and now. Here I will only briefly recap the issues, but pay more attention to the breakdown of any clear distinction between marriage and asceticism (as in 2 Cor 11:1–2) and try to read Paul in a different light, drawing on modern theories of intimacies that decenter nuclear families as paradigms of intimate relations and instead focus on the webs of close relationships that people build materially, emotionally, and sexually.

1 Corinthians 7 addresses heterosexual desire, partnership, and reproduction in the broader perspectives of "the current crisis" and sanctification "in Christ" (1 Cor 7:14, 16, 26). Paul is responding to a previous letter from the Corinthians (cf. 7:1), which apparently included questions about asceticism, marriage, and reproduction.⁷ Generally, the chapter characterizes marriage as an emergency exit for the fainthearted; and legitimate reasons for marrying—or better, for not marrying—is Paul's main focus. He therefore holds that both husbands and wives have a duty to be sexually available to their spouse unless they have periodically agreed upon something different (7:4–5). Arrangements about sexual abstinence should have fixed time limits in order to avoid temptation. Nevertheless, Paul also maintains that a woman is happier if she remains unmarried (7:8, 34–35).

In a first-century context, this was a rather revolutionary view—and one that was quickly brought back in line by the following generations of Pauline Christians, as seen in the "Paul" of the deuterio-Pauline Colossians and Ephesians and the Pastoral Letters. Thus Colossians demands, "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (3:18). Ephesians simply presupposes that everyone is married and prescribes that wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything (5:24). The men should love their wives as Christ loved the church—that is, in a clear, hierarchical way. As with gender hierarchy, so also with social status; the two hierarchies intimately intersect. The Pauline letters do not question the institution of slavery, but are concerned that slaves should be treated well and that "whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ" (1 Cor 7:21–23). The "Paul" of Colossians also commands slaves to obey their masters (3:22). As is clear from the example of Hagar earlier, such a command also applies to the sexual domain (see further discussion in Glancy in this volume).

The ancient manuscripts disagree on how to understand the categorization of females, *parthenoi* and others, in 1 Corinthians 7:34. Paul's discussion includes a binary opposition between women (*gynē*) and virgins—though it is not entirely clear whether the binary is that of the woman and the unmarried virgin or (the preferred variant) the unmarried woman and the virgin. The latter makes sense and probably reflects a congregation with numerous widows, unmarried slave women with children, and so forth. *Agamos* (unmarried) is used for both males and females (7:32, 34). Again for the married, the active form *gamēsas/sasa* is used for both the male and female (aorist participle in masculine and feminine, respectively). This is noticeable because the middle form of the verb was conventionally used for the female—to such an extent that the dictionary translates the active form as "take to wife," the middle form as "to give oneself/someone in marriage," and mentions 1 Corinthians 7 as one of only two exceptions to this usage (see LSJ, s.v. *gameō*).

Such queer vocabulary *might* mean that Paul sees the woman who is marrying not merely as a commodity but also as an agent, a subject with the opportunity to take or reject a spouse. And indeed, taken in isolation, this unconventional usage could be used to argue that Paul considers men and women equal in marriage. Yet the question still lingers whether he does in fact make the woman responsible for her civil status and (re)productive capacity, especially given that both of these are beyond the control of woman-as-commodity and as non-*anthrōpos* according to 7:1—and according to Jewish and Roman laws of marriage.

We catch a glimpse into Paul's own webs of close friends and collaborators, hosts and benefactors, through the introductions and conclusions of his letters. Especially interesting in this respect is Romans 16—a postscript to the main letter, possibly attached to it at a later stage, consisting of a list of greetings and semiofficial “letters of recommendation” from Paul's friends in the Corinthia to those in the area of Rome and environs. Several of the greetings involve community hosts: from Gaius, Paul's host and also the host of the community in Corinth, to the hosts of the recipient community who are able to receive letters on the community's behalf (16:23). The verse includes a greeting from Erastos, who is mentioned with the title of city treasurer, and who probably had some formal function in the *ekklēsia* for that reason.⁸ The closing of 1 Corinthians greets Aquilas and Priska, a couple housing a Christian community in their home. They are also mentioned in Romans 16:3, but in reverse order. They are longtime close partners of Paul now working in “Asia,” that is Asia Minor or Turkey of our day. We will return to them in their status as a couple later.

Male Partners

If we try to avoid as far as possible reading Paul's letters in light of later conceptualizations of Christian sexual ethics, it becomes hard to overlook the puzzling endurance of certain of Paul's travel partners. In the greetings of Romans 16, the scribe, Tertius, presents himself in 16:22. Scribes were usually slaves and held a most intimate relationship to their owners, which to some well-educated, upper-class Romans was at times a reason for writing *sua manu*—with their own hand instead of through the hand of the too-well-informed scribe (McDonnell 1996: 475). Still, no one seems to have held a more intimate relationship to Paul than Timothy.

In one of the final verses of Romans (16:21), Timothy is mentioned as Paul's partner at work (*synergos*), whereas Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater are fellow kin or relatives (*syngeneis*). In 1 Corinthians 4:17, Paul describes Timothy as his beloved and faithful child (*agapēton kai piston*). Timothy traveled faithfully with Paul throughout and perhaps beyond the period in which Paul wrote letters. He also traveled alone on Paul's behalf to the Corinthians, the Philippians, and the Thessalonians. He is further mentioned as coauthor of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians (also the disputed epistles Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, considered by many scholars to be deutero-Pauline). The introductions of 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians mention a further travel partner, Silvanus, although he is not described by Paul in similarly affectionate terms.

The letter to Philemon, the shortest writing in the New Testament, is authored by Paul in prison toward the end of his life, again together with Timothy “our brother.” It is addressed to “Philemon, the beloved and our co-worker.” Paul conveys further greetings from Epaphras, who is imprisoned too, perhaps in the same prison. Epaphras might also have been the one appointed to bring the letter to Philemon. In the letter, Paul asks for mercy on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus. We also catch a glimpse into a wider web of Christians around Philemon: sister Appia as well as Archippos, a fellow soldier (for the gospel, we must assume).

With reference to Tertius as mentioned earlier, we can assume that Paul did not physically write down his letters, which means that Timothy and Paul (and sometimes also Silvanus) provided the content for the scribe. When we say “Paul says ...,” in some of the relevant letters, it may in fact be Timothy's voice we hear; the two have blended into one through the hand of the scribe. Since Timothy holds such a central place as significant other to Paul, post-Pauline Christianity produced no less than two letters in his honor, 1 and 2 Timothy. Pauline scholars agree almost unanimously, for stylistic and theological reasons, that these were not written by Paul himself. Besides, Timothy seems never to have been more than two steps behind Paul, so such letters would represent a rather superfluous form of communication! In addition, the Acts of the Apostles, written around 90–100 CE, has quite a bit to say about Timothy.

These post-Pauline writings have strongly influenced how later readers understood the relationship between Paul and Timothy. However, thinking in terms of theories of intimacies can help us question how and why 1 and 2 Timothy have been able to overwrite what Paul says in his undisputed letters regarding the nature of their relationship. While the texts do not provide enough evidence to draw definitive conclusions, they speak clearly enough about two men who shared much of their life together over substantial periods of

time. Historical speculation—disciplined and enlightened by theories of gender, sexualities, and intimacies—may help us see how not being married was not necessarily the same as having no significant others.

Moving beyond Paul's special relationship to Timothy, other Pauline letters reference coauthors (see, e.g., the reference to Sosthenes in 1 Cor 1:1) and companions (e.g., "the brothers who are with me," Gal 1:2; Phil 4:21). Through these declarations, we get an extraordinary glimpse into a tightly woven homosocial group, interacting with one another as next of kin. Since we do not hear of any wife to whom Paul might be attached, it is not unreasonable to assume that other men in this group who are not mentioned with a female partner did not have one. The level of homoerotic tension is not for us to evaluate. But any investigations into early Christian "families" and sexualities should cast the net far more widely than simply exploring traces that resemble modern patterns of family or homo- and heterosexual relationships. The nuclear family cannot have been a dominant mode of intimacy in Pauline Christianity; in fact, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul warns about the perils of such a life. The more open notion of webs of intimacies may help us grasp more accurately the experimentation and variety in relationships between members of an emerging revolutionary movement.

Female Partners

p. 327 Paul did not only rely on a homosocial group of male next of kins, friends, and coworkers. Whatever else he says about women and gender in the more argumentative parts of his letters, a striking feature of the introductory and closing portions of Paul's letters is the extent to which women figure prominently. Since the fringes of his letters are less ideologically charged and instead filled with practical information, they present a more realistic image of how many women were involved in the Pauline movement, at which levels, and in what ways. The texts and the names have been there all along. Yet this has been overlooked until relatively recently, due to the fact that biblical scholars generally lacked the epistemological and/or gender-sensitive lenses with which to grasp the information. Moreover, when scholars did notice the female names, they often found it too incredible that women could have had the level of authority that the letters grant to them. Thus, in numerous modern translations, many odd things have happened: female names became male names (Junia to Junias, Rom 16:7); benefactor and leader became "helper" (*prostatis*, Rom 16:2); *diakonos*, which later became a distinct liturgical role (but not yet in Paul's time), has been translated differently when designating a woman versus a man—sometimes even as "deaconess" (in the modern world, a female designation for a nurse affiliated with a religious charity establishment).

Today, gender-sensitive translations of the Bible are approaching the Bible in a more literal way again. For example, the NRSV mentions the female apostle Junia, operating together with her partner Andronikus (Rom 16:7). Phoebe, the *prostatis* mentioned earlier (Rom 16:1–2) has been reinstated as "benefactor" (rather than "helper") and hence patron for Paul himself and many others, as well as "deacon" (*diakonos*) of the Christian community in Kenchreai, the harbor city of Corinth. This means that she was host of the community and opened her house for their meetings. In general, the terms used to describe Phoebe are drawn from the field of ancient patron–client relations (unfortunately we cannot substitute "matron" here, as that term has entirely different connotations), through which people were tied closely together by way of hierarchies of service, loyalty, protection, donations, and so forth. It is noteworthy that Paul here presents himself as Phoebe's client, not her patron. In short: he was dependent on her infrastructure, networks, and material assets, not the other way round. In return, he could give her fame and praise her publicly, as he does here.

We further hear about Priska and Aquilas, with whom Paul collaborated. They were from Asia Minor (like Paul himself), they were fellow Jews, and they hosted a church in their house (Rom 16:5). Thus, the mention in Acts 18 that Paul lived with them in Corinth is plausible, although not verifiable. Such cohabitation may seem odd today, but must have been very common in the Roman Empire, with much movement and little stability in close relations (due to poverty, illness, death, etc.). Paul's cohabitation with this couple probably meant that the larger Corinthian community perceived their house church as a Jewish sect. Scholars make a point of the fact that Paul in Romans 16:3 mentions Priska before her partner, contrary to the conventions of the time. However, in 1 Corinthians 16:19, where Paul is much more cautious in order not to encourage female prophets (Wire 1990: 123–27), the couple are mentioned in conventional order. Romans 16 also mentions three additional missionary couples: Philologus and Iulia; Nereus and his unnamed sister, who have also apparently opened their home for a church; the third couple, Tryfaina and Tryfosa, are two women who seem to be itinerant missionaries, since they do not house any church.

In Philippians, Paul also mentions a female missionary couple in passing (4:2), as he seeks to strengthen the community in their struggle against external threats. The couple ↵ represents an internal threat, or perhaps two: Euodia and Syntyche (Abrahamsen 1994). These two women's names have been interpreted in different ways. Paul does not say much about them. They have clearly fallen out with each other, which happens between friends. Here I situate them as a couple because Paul refers to them in the same way that he does other pairs usually labeled as couples. He mentions that the two have strenuously labored alongside him in the gospel, which is probably the reason why he cares about their conflict—rather than, for example, leaving two insignificant matrons of the community to sort out their own differences without making their falling out such a public and intercommunity affair. Paul is, after all, not even there but addressing the two women from another place. He also asks them to arrive at the same understanding (*to auto phronein*) and asks his respected partner (4:3), whoever that might be, to intervene. From this we can conclude that the welfare of the community is at stake in the relationship between Euodia and Syntyche, although we do not quite know why.

Many additional women are also referenced without being attached to another man or woman; they are thanked and praised, both in Romans 16 and elsewhere. Judging from 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul saw it as his right to bring one of these along with him, but he chose to abstain. Or he always had Timothy.

Female Teachers

The presence of women in the Pauline communities presented other challenges as well. In 1 Corinthians 11, we find discussion of women's dress during ritual gatherings—namely, Paul argues that women should cover their head while praying and prophesying in the *ekklēsia*, and many scholars have explained this with reference to sexuality: from tempting the men to tempting the angels (D'Angelo 1995). But in the same chapter, we find also arguments in favor of women's prophetic leadership. How can this be?

If we look at Paul's statements in a broader historical context, the following becomes clear: first, that it was a common understanding long before Paul that women should not be “seen” in public space; second, that Paul actually takes for granted in 1 Corinthians 11 that women pray and prophesy. It is *teaching* that he seems to think women cannot engage in. Such a distinction was also widely shared across teaching establishments around the early Roman Mediterranean basin (Økland 2004: 204–7). There were not many women receiving advanced education. How Paul handled the cognitive dissonance between a negative view of women's acquisition and transmission of knowledge and their visibility in the *ekklēsia* on the one hand and an extensive deployment of women in his mission on the other, we will never know. In any event, it is clear from the historical context that although Paul did not deem women to be as cognitively capable as men, he did consider prayer and prophecy to be fitting cultic activities for them. Here a likely explanation is that such activities were probably construed as not requiring a very high cognitive function, since the one carrying out the cultic functions was thought to be merely a vehicle.

Gender—The Ambiguous Heritage

Issues of gender and sexuality are at the core of Pauline theology. Yet the reception of this legacy is a complicated one. In the conclusion of his book *Der Dienst der Frau in den ersten Jahrhunderten der christlichen Kirche* (1902), Leopold Zscharnack suggested in metaphorical rather than gender-critical language that there were two “seeds” in early Christianity with regard to how the church approached women's participation and function in it. To begin with, women were seen as essentially the same as men, part of the brotherhood, and they could pray, prophesy, exercise authority, and so forth. This is the Pauline stage presented in this article. Yet quickly this model gave way to another one, in which women and men were seen as so different that they could not share the same virtues. This “seed” grew until the modern era, so Zscharnack thought.

Today we would say that early Christianity included a diversity of gender models—and that its reception history is also a history of how hegemony has shifted between them in different periods. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Paul's texts exhibit a clear patriarchal model. And later texts such as the Pastorals reiterated and intensified patriarchal Pauline themes not only to add stricter limitations but also to bring the tradition more in accordance with Roman bourgeois standards (Hoklotubbe 2017; Kartzow 2009: 119–20). In later periods of European history, it was not particularly complicated to use Pauline statements on

gender and sexuality for the purposes of excluding women and sexual minorities from public space (e.g., Brooten 1996: 189–90). And yet, on the other hand, Paul also inspired writings such as the Acts of Thecla, in which the female protagonist reaches a high level of autonomy.

If Paul's letters are ambiguous and multivalent, his most prominent successors clarified and simplified his message in a direction that increased the significance of gender differences, both essentially and with regard to which roles men and women could have. Whereas Paul encourages break-ups and fall-outs for the sake of Christ, some of his later followers concerned themselves more with fitting in and not causing offense—especially in the area of sexual and gender practices perceived as deviant. Because Paul's various statements regarding women and gender point readers in very different directions, "Paul's view of women/gender/sexuality" has become a highly contested topic. If he had put forth a clear and consistent sexology, there would be little to nothing to discuss. But these discussions did not start in the modern era or in gender-critical studies; they have come and gone throughout the history of Christianity.

Notes

- p. 330
1. The biblical scholar who has taken this theoretical development most fully on board and applied its perspectives to the Hebrew Bible tradition (with purposes similar to my own) is Saul Olyan. See his excellent 2017 study, especially the introductory chapter. Olyan outlines the ⁴ terminological web and explains how friendship terms can be used for close blood relatives as well as "sexual intimates," thereby complicating our understanding of the phenomenon of friendship. Olyan also traces the influence of Greek and Roman discussions of friendship on writers in the tradition he studies (96–100).
 2. Note that Greek, both ancient and modern, has grammatical gender, while English does not. This means that it is not necessary to add gendered terms as qualifications (such as "male/female author" and similar), because the gender in question is already clear from the grammatical form. Nevertheless, in many modern translations, the more gender-inclusive but less clarifying and not especially literal expression "children of God" is used to translate Galatians 3:26 (e.g., NRSV). However, Paul was fully able to distinguish between the relevant terms—for example, he uses *tekna* (children) in Rom 8:21; 9:8; Phil 2:15. Thus, whichever term he chooses, it seems that Paul sees all Christians as sons of God in analogy with Christ.
 3. Cf. also the inclusion of "and daughters" in 2 Corinthians 6:16–18.
 4. In his discussion of Paul as a first-century Jew who criticized circumcision, Shaye Cohen also points out that "for all of Paul's opposition to circumcision, one argument that he might have used but did not use is the argument from the non-circumcision of women. ... But Paul fails to observe that circumcision also invidiously discriminates between male and female" (1998: 142).
 5. Hoffmann argues importantly that the problem with circumcision is not necessarily its effects on individual male bodies and selves, but its unintended effects and consequences for female members of the community. In spite of modern, corrective rhetorics trying to equalize the imbalance somehow, women's secondary status is evidenced through social roles tied to domesticity and to the periphery of the publicly visible community: "The sign of the covenant can be made only on the male sexual organ. Women thus remain covenanted only through the male who is stamped and in whose domain they have their official socially recognized existence" (1996: 213–14).
 6. "Dark," that is, according to modern standards; numerous intersectional analyses have dealt extensively with the intersecting categories of gender, sexuality, race, and social status that, taken together, construe Isaac as true heir and Ishmael as a slave (for an early work, see Glancy 2002: 34–36; also Buell 2017: 458–63).
 7. For a convincing reading of 7:1, see May 2004. May argues, against the bulk of scholars, that the claim in 7:1 that "it is good for a human being not to touch a woman" is Paul's own view, not a quotation of the Corinthians' view. I agree and see 7:1 as being in perfect harmony with the values Paul promotes elsewhere.
 8. Steven J. Friesen (2010) has pointed out that in the lists of the city treasurers of Corinth, this name does not occur.

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