



“Worlds Apart?
James Brownson & the
Sexual Diversity of the
Greco-Roman World”

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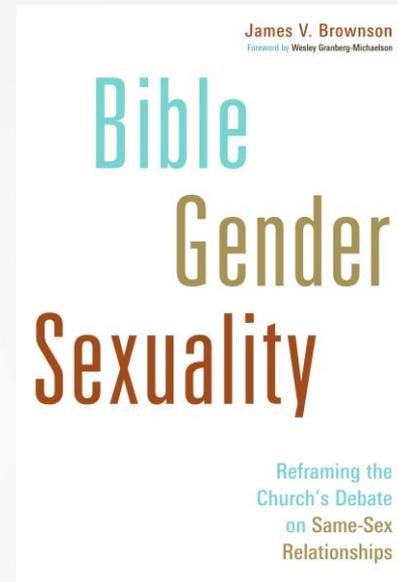
Biblical Interpretation Basics

- The Bible is not written to us, but it is written for us.
- The more our context corresponds to their context, the higher probability we can apply the text directly to our context.

Worlds Apart?

Dr. James Brownson

- They had:
 - More narrow (abusive) practices of same-sex relationships
- They lacked:
 - A modern notion of sexual orientation
- We have:
 - A proper notion of sexual orientation
 - A broader (proper) practice of same-sex marriage



Joining the Conversation

- Cantarella, Eva. *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, 2nd ed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002 [1st ed., 1992]).
- Crompton, Louis. *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- Harper, Kyle. *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- Smith, Mark D. "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 223-256.

Brownson's claims

- Patriarchy:
 - Men have a higher status than women
 - One partner in same-sex sexual activity is 'degraded' to the role of a woman.

Brownson's claims

- Pederasty & prostitution
 - *Arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* (1 Cor. 6:9-10)
 - Temporary, not permanent
 - Asymmetrical and abusive

Brownson's claims

- Orientation:
 - “The ancient world had no notion of sexual orientation” (255, 166).
 - “Jews and Christians opposed to same-sex eroticism show no awareness of the notion of the modern notion of sexual orientation” (178).
 - “An awareness of a ‘natural’ orientation toward same-sex relations *is attested in Greek and Roman sources*” (229).
- Condemnation of...
 - Quantity of lust, not quality/kind

Do they hold up? Orientation

- Orientation: innate, persistent, non-volitional attraction
- Plato's *Symposium* & soulmates
 - "Clearly identifies another class of man—a class who are exclusively devoted to their own sex...This idea of a homosexual 'orientation,' though by no means central to Greek thinking as it is to ours, was certainly understood by Plato and his contemporaries." (Crompton, 57)

Orientation

Other sources

- Plato's *Phaedrus*
- Pseudo-Aristotle's *Problems* → physiological cause
- Caelius Aurelius → hereditary
- Soranus of Ephesus → disease
- Ptolemy → astrology = scientific framework and underlying causes

Orientation

- “Ptolemy speaks of a degree of gender deviance that bore on the individual’s ‘whole nature,’ and the language of nature marks a subtle innovation. There was nothing new about the ascription of certain patterns of desire to a definite social type, but the placement of the traditional type, with all the stereotypical qualities attached, into a scientific matrix, purportedly capable of explaining the natural mechanics of sexual deviance, was a step beyond the amorphous stereotypes of traditional prejudice. In short, what was new was the scientific framework and the types of sexual etiology it created” (Harper, 33-34).

Do they hold up? Patriarchy

- Brownson: 1st century patriarchal culture explains why the Bible criticizes same-sex relationships
- Problem 1: But then why does it also critique the man who is acting like a man?
- Response from Brownson: it's violent and abusive!
- My rejoinder: Wait. Same-sex relationships are criticized in the NT because the NT just *mirrors* the common patriarchal views of its culture (women are looked down on; receptive male partners are acting like/treated like women), BUT...the NT so *transcends* its culture that it does something no Greek or Roman author does—criticize the insertive male partner!

Patriarchy

- If these are abusive relationships, why does Paul criticize the receptive partner?
- Varying degrees of status → natural sex = “sex that mirrored social hierarchy” (Kyle Harper, *From Sin to Shame*, 145).
- Brownson assumes only two categories – male and female – WHY?

Patriarchy

- “Brownson’s assumption that there are only two categories—male and female—ironically shows the depths to which he has absorbed the NT’s radical transformation of the multi-layered social sexual reality of antiquity into a paradigm where there is one and only one distinction that truly matters: male and female” (Parler, 13)

Pederasty

- See <http://www.bransonparler.com/blog/were-there-non-abusive-same-sex-relationships-in-new-testament-times> for full references

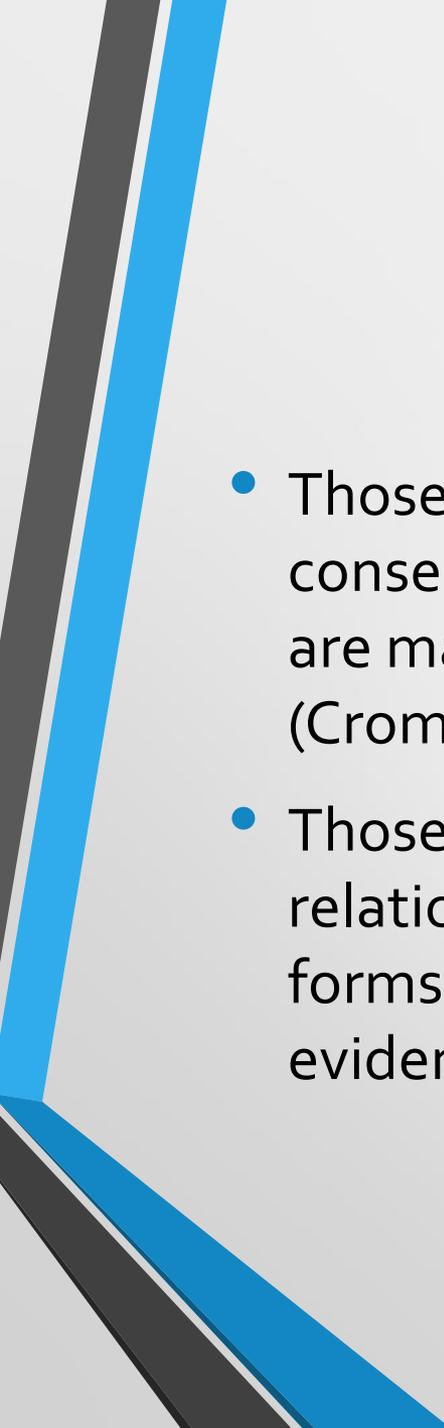
Pederasty

- “Whether the same thing is meant by ‘marriage’ in all these cases is unclear, as is the legal status of such unions, but the existence of some form of homosexual marriages cannot be doubted, and none of them can be termed pederastic in any meaningful sense” (Smith, 237).

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- We have “extraordinary testimony” to “durable forms of same-sex companionship. In a peaceful and prosperous society, amid a highly urbanized and remarkably interconnected empire where marriage was valorized as an institution of the greatest moral and emotional fulfillment, same-sex pairs openly claimed, and ritually enacted, their own conjugal rights” (Harper, 36).

Does Brownson's logic hold?

- “What is significant about early Christian moralizing, from Paul onward, is that it drew so little from established modes of criticism...Christian sexual ideology collapsed all forms of same-sex contact, whether pederastic or companionate, into one category” (Harper, 99).

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- Those who try to see room for affirming loving, consensual same-sex relationships in light of Scripture are making a “strained” and “unhistorical” judgment (Crompton, 114).
 - Those who try to see “good” and “bad” forms of same-sex relationships (with Scripture only condemning “bad” forms) are taking a position that, based on the historical evidence, is “unacceptable” (Cantarella, 191-194).