

A Note on the Old Testament Background of Rom 1,23-27

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In St. Paul's discussion of the godlessness of man in Rom 1,18-32, the parallel units vv. 23-24 and 25-27 both juxtapose two topics which are regarded as typical examples of this godlessness, idolatry (vv. 23 and 25) and perverse sexuality (v. 24) - further specified as homosexuality (vv. 26-27). These two topics are linked together by the link words διὸ (v. 24) and διὰ τοῦτο (v. 26)¹, and by the repetition of the verb μετήλλαξαν, which in v. 25 is used about idol worshippers who "exchanged" the truth about God for a lie, and in v. 26 about women who "exchanged" natural sexual relations for unnatural.

It is well known that the terminology which is used in these verses echoes the language of central Old Testament (LXX) passages dealing with idolatry - cf. esp. Ps 106,20; Jer 2,11; Deut 4,16-18; and with homosexuality - cf. esp. Lev 18,22; 20,13. In recent years it has also been pointed out that Rom 1,23 depicts idolatry with a terminology which seems to echo negatively the language of Gen 1,26-27².

The juxtaposition of idolatry and homosexuality here in Rom 1,23-27 is often taken as a reflex of St. Paul's encounter with typical features in contemporary pagan culture³. However, on the background of the Old Testament influence on the choice of terminology in these verses, one could ask if also this juxtaposition can be understood in the light of the Old Testament⁴. I believe it can, when the reading of Rom 1,23 as a negative echo of Gen 1,26-27 is extended - in Rom to 1,23-27, and in Gen to 1,26-28.

It could seem difficult to transform the concepts of imago dei in Gen 1 into the concepts of imago hominis in Rom 1, but such a transformation is

¹The repetition of these link words belongs to a series of repetitions which serve to give vv. 23-24 and 25-27 a parallel structure:

καὶ ἥλλαξαν (23) // οἵτινες μετήλλαξαν (25)
τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ (23) // τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ (25)
διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς (24) // διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς (26).

²Both N. HYLDAHL, A Reminiscence of the Old Testament at Romans 1. 23, NTS 2, 1955/56, 285-288; and J. JERVELL, Imago Dei. Gen 1,26f im Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den Paulinischen Briefen, FRLANT 76, Göttingen 1960, 320, claim to be the first ones to have noticed this connection. Of commentaries where this reading is given consideration, cf. especially U. WILCKENS, Der Brief an die Römer, EKK 6/1, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, 107-108.

³Cf. e. g. K. WENGST, Paulus und die Homosexualität. Überlegungen zu Röm 1,26f., ZEE 31, 1987, 72-81; and P. von der OSTEN-SACKEN, Paulinisches Evangelium und Homosexualität, Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift 3, 1986, 28-49.

⁴For extrabiblical material linking the two topics together, cf. e. g. SapSal 13-15 (i. a. 14,26-27); TestLev 17,11; and especially TestNaph 3,2-4, which, as pointed out by J. JEREMIAS, Zu Rm 1,22-32, ZNW 45, 1954, 119-121, resembles the terminology of Rom 1,23-27 very closely.

actually prepared by the Old Testament itself. One of the passages noted above as Old Testament background for St. Paul's presentation of idolatry, Deut 4,16-18, has a terminology which quite closely resembles that of Gen 1, although the setting of this terminology is utterly different in these two texts, from the creation of man in Gen 1 to the making of pagan images in Deut 4. These verses in Deut 4 are generally taken as belonging to the same textual layer of the Pentateuch as Gen 1, the Priestly Code - P⁶; thus, by playing on the same pregnant terminology, P was able to point out the contrast between

- man, who originally was created in the image of God and according to his likeness; further defined as male and female - placed on the earth to fill it and rule over its creatures;

- man, who now faces the danger of turning this order of the creation upside down, by making and worshipping images in the likeness of himself - and the other creatures.

Now, what is then the relationship between these two texts of P, Gen 1,26-28 and Deut 4,16-18, and the one by St. Paul in Rom 1,23-27? Some details should be noticed:

a) In Gen 1 the relationship between God and man is expressed in v. 26 as ἀνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν, and in v. 27 this κατ' εἰκόνα is closer defined as ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ. In Deut 4:16 the terminology of Gen 1,26 and 27 is mixed to ὁμοίωμα ἀρσενικοῦ ἢ θηλυκοῦ. As for Rom 1,23, the reading ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνος φαρτοῦ ἀνθρώπου is terminologically closer to Gen 1 than to Deut 4; even the supposed pleonasm ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνος is reasonable when read as an echo of Gen 1,26. However, this terminological closeness to Gen 1 is combined with a factual closeness to Deut 4. And the result is a clear impression of how the idolater worships images of himself - instead of the God in whose image he is created. Thus, idolatry is described in terms of a reversing of the creation of man.

b) The relationship between God and man is then further defined in Gen 1,27 by the parallel sentences κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν // ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς. The purpose of this sexual differentiation into male and female is presented in v. 28, where God blesses "them" (αὐτούς, cf. the end of v. 27), so that they can be fruitful and increase in number. This sexual differentiation between θῆλυς and ἄρσεν is repeated in Deut 4,16, but there with the slightly different terms θηλυκός and ἀρσενικός, and without references to the purpose of this differentiation. Rom 1 is terminologically closer to Gen 1 than to Deut 4 also at this point; the θήλειαι and ἀρσενες in Rom 1,26-27 are plurals of the singular θῆλυς and ἄρσεν in Gen 1, and one could also argue that the *berakha* in Rom 1,25, ὃς ἐστὶν εὐλογητός, could be an echo of the ἡλόγησεν αὐτούς ὁ θεός in Gen 1,28. Also the sexual differentiation is here emphasized, but compared with Gen 1 it has completely lost its meaning - so that the obligation to be fruitful is replaced by

⁶For details, cf. D. KNAPP, Deuteronomium 4. Literarische Analyse und theologische Interpretation, GTA 35, Göttingen 1987, 34-35, 88-91.

fruitless sexual relations.

c) The relationship between God and man is finally presented by Gen 1,26 and 28 as an obligation for man to have dominion over the other creatures. Two of these are mentioned in all three texts, the birds and the reptiles⁶. In Gen 1,26 and 28 these are presented as πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ and ἐρπετῶν τῶν ἐρπόντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. Of these, Deut 4,17 has rephrased the former to (ὁμοίωμα παντός) ὀρνέου πτερωτοῦ, while the latter is rendered in singular. Also here the reading πετεινῶν and ἐρπετῶν in Rom 1,23 is terminologically closer to Gen 1 than to Deut 4, but the function is reversed in the same way as in Deut 4. The creatures are not any longer subjects for man's dominion, but patterns for images which this man can worship.

From this survey it seems clear to me that Gen 1,26-28 provides a reasonable background for St. Paul's juxtaposition of idolatry and homosexuality in Rom 1,23-27. Deut 4 is obviously the model for this negative echoing of Gen 1, but both the choice of terminology and the emphasizing of the sexual differentiation point back to Gen 1, rather than to Deut 4. Accordingly, when St. Paul in his discussion of the godlessness of man in Rom 1,18-32 juxtaposes idolatry and homosexuality, he thinks in terms of a reversing of the creation of man; a point which also corresponds with the major argument of this passage, that man is without excuse for his godlessness - since God has been known ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου, v. 20.

⁶The τετραπόδων listed in Rom 1,23 in between πετεινῶν and ἐρπετῶν, echoes Gen 1,24, and has no counterpart in Deut 4.