

“The Dogs Bark But the Caravan Moves On”:

My Response to Jean-Fabrice Nardelli’s “Critique” of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*

Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of New Testament, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

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Author’s note: Nardelli’s critique comes in the midst of a busy season of work for me and so my response will be offered in piecemeal as time permits. With each new piece in place, it will be evident how tendentious and ineffective Nardelli’s critique is. I will change the date of the article to correspond to each new addition.

Jean-Fabrice Nardelli, a classicist at the University of Provence (France) has written a shrill 40-page critique of my first book, entitled “*The Bible and Homosexual Practice Ten Years After: A Non-Theological Assessment*” that is long on insults and personal attacks but short on substantive arguments to refute the main lines of evidence that I put forward as regards the Bible and homosexual practice. Nardelli has written two books attempting to show correlations between the relationship of David and Jonathan on the one hand and alleged homoerotic relationships in Homer’s *Odyssey* (Telemachus and Peisistratus)¹ and in *The Gilgamesh Epic* (Gilgamesh and Enkidu).² That is the extent of his intersection with biblical texts.

Nardelli’s strength is in Homeric Greek literature and, to a lesser extent, ancient Near Eastern texts. However, he is not a biblical scholar—a point that he demonstrates on nearly every page of his failed critique of my work. He has only limited competence in the analysis of Old Testament texts. His handling of New Testament texts is so bad that it walks the fine line between comedy and tragedy. When he comments on p. 32 that “time has come to conclude and leave aside the duty of impartiality,” the urge to laugh out loud is moderated only by a feeling of pity for a man so self-deluded. The inaccuracies start with the first sentence (referring to me as an Assistant Professor, which in another posting he makes a point of ridicule) and continue unabated throughout the paper.

Nardelli obsesses on relatively minor points of the book, such as a ridiculous three-and-a-half page critique (pp. 9-12) of a three-sentence observation that I make about the Greek word

¹ *Le motif de la paire d’amis héroïque à prolongements homophiles: perspectives odysseennes et proche-orientales* (Classical and Byzantine Monographs 57; Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 2004), 297 pgs.

² *Homosexuality and Liminality in the Gilgameš and Samuel* (Classical and Byzantine Monographs 64; Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 2007), 106 pgs.

epithumia (ἐπιθυμία), “desire,” and another three pages (pp. 22-24) on a short paragraph in my book on Jesus’ use of the term *raka* in Matt 5:22 (and otherwise no discussion of a 43-page chapter of Jesus). In neither case is any major argument in my first book affected, even if Nardelli were generally correct in his observations. This majoring in minors goes hand in hand, of course, with the practice of largely ignoring the main lines of my argument regarding biblical texts. The few that he attempts to refute are badly handled, as we shall see. The whole of his response, which presents itself as an unbiased critique of the major points of my work, has instead the effect of a small dog nipping at the heels but little else. The caravan moves on.

I. Nardelli’s “Critique” of My Analysis of New Testament Texts

A. *The intertextual echo in Romans 1:26-27 to Genesis 1:27*

On pp. 17-18 Nardelli cites as a key example of my alleged “sweeping recourse to unsupported assertions, lexicography-wise” the fact that I see in Rom 1:26-27 an intertextual echo to Genesis 1:27 (“male and female he made them”) because of the repeated use of the terms “males” (*arsenes*) and “females” (*thēleiai*) rather than “men” (*anthrōpoi* or *andres*) and “women” (*gunaikes*). This is a classic example of Nardelli saying nothing even as he looks like he is saying a lot, suppressing the evidence that I put forward and raising objections that are irrelevant to the issue at hand. His ‘critique’ is shockingly bad. Here’s Nardelli’s ‘argument’:

1. Nardelli states that when the term *arsēn* is used independently of *thēlus* (Rev 12:5, 13) it doesn’t imply an echo back to Gen 1:27. This is a completely irrelevant consideration because I am considering Rom 1:26-27 as a unit, not 1:26 (which mentions only *thēleiai*) independently of 1:27 (which mentions both *arsenes* and *thēleiai*).
2. Then Nardelli makes an equally irrelevant argument that when *arren-* is used in a compound word in Patristic Greek it doesn’t necessarily echo Gen 1:27. Whoever said it would?
3. Finally he notes that “in non-Christian, imperial Greek one can find the pair *arsēn* – *thēlus* used without any allusion to Gen 1:27—a completely vacuous point since one wouldn’t expect pagan texts to echo Jewish Scripture.

That’s it: the grand total of Nardelli’s argument against an intertextual echo to Gen 1:27. He concludes: “Why should it be any different in Rom 1:26-27, where only an arbitrary *petitio principii* would have us admit that Paul’s choice of words points to the Greek of Gen 1:27?” He calls any intertextual echo at best “conjectural.”

What Nardelli conveniently fails to disclose to readers is that he quotes a single paragraph from the section of my first book that provides translation notes to Rom 1:24-27 (p. 236) but ignores a fuller case for the intertextual echo to the Genesis creation texts on pp. 289-93. I devote four-and-a-half pages to laying out the reasons for seeing an echo in Rom 1:23-27 to Gen 1:26-

27 and yet there is not a peep from Nardelli about it. It is very hard to miss. There is even a boldface heading on p. 289: “**Did Paul Not Have Creation in Mind When He Spoke of Same-Sex Intercourse?**” This heading is also listed in the table of contents on p. 9. Either he hasn’t read that and other key sections of my book and hasn’t even looked carefully at the table of contents—in which case he shouldn’t be holding himself up as someone who can speak authoritatively about it—or in duplicitous fashion he has failed to alert readers to the full-range of evidence that I provide to support the thesis.

Here is the contextual evidence:

1. The immediately preceding context for Rom 1:26-27 directs readers to the creation texts, emphasizing as they do God’s role as “*Creator*” (1:25, in between the discussion of sexual impurity in 1:24 and 1:26-27, no less) and the transparent knowledge about God and ourselves available “since the *creation* of the world” (1:20) that can be culled from observation of “*nature*,” that is, the material structures of creation still intact despite the fall (1:26-27). A Christian reader or hearer would have to be obtuse, probably deliberately so, to miss the pointer.
2. Then there is the fact that there are *six* points of correspondence between Rom 1:23 and Gen 1:26:

Rom 1:23: “[Humans] exchanged the glory of the imperishable God for the *likeness* of the *image* of a perishable *human* and of *birds* and of *four-footed animals* and of *reptiles*.”

Gen 1:26: “Let us make a *human* according to our *image* and... *likeness*; and let them rule over the ... *birds* ... and the *cattle* ... and the *reptiles*.”

Now why should it dawn on a Christian reader that Paul is echoing Gen 1:26 in Rom 1:23 just because there are ‘only’ six points of correspondence between one verse each and this in a context where Paul is referring explicitly to the Creator and his creation? That’s a stretch isn’t it? All the more since the very next verse starts the discussion of how pagans had to suppress the truth about the way God made them in order to engage in self-dishonoring sexual impurity of having sex with members of the same sex, right?

3. So when in Rom 1:26-27 Paul uses the nomenclature “males” and “females” he couldn’t be thinking of the very next verse in Gen 1:27, “male and female he created them,” could he? Let’s look at how it appears in chart form:

Gen 1:26-27

Rom 1:23, 26-27

A. God's likeness and image in humans

(1)	human (<i>anthropos</i>)	likeness (<i>homoioma</i>)	(3)
(2)	image (<i>eikon</i>)	image (<i>eikon</i>)	(2)
(3)	likeness (<i>homoiosis</i>)	human (<i>anthropos</i>)	(1)

B. Dominion over the animal kingdom

(4)	birds (<i>peteina</i>)	birds (<i>peteina</i>)	(4)
(5)	cattle (<i>ktene</i>)	quadrupeds (<i>tetrapoda</i>)	(5)
(6)	reptiles (<i>herpeta</i>)	reptiles (<i>herpeta</i>)	(6)

C. Male-female differentiation

(7)	male (<i>arsen</i>)	females (<i>theleiai</i>)	(8)
(8)	female (<i>thelus</i>)	males (<i>arsenes</i>)	(7)

Even the differences in order in the first and third sets can be readily explained.³ The point of the echo to Gen 1:26-27 is this: Those who suppress the truth about God transparent “since the creation of the world” to venture off into worship of idols are more likely to suppress the truth about the complementarity of the sexes, male and female, transparent in “nature.”

4. The claim that Paul couldn't be referring to Gen 1:27 in his indictment of homosexual practice becomes increasingly absurd when we realize that Paul appealed elsewhere to Gen 1:27 and 2:24 when dealing with similar issues. Paul's reference to homosexual practice in 1 Cor 6:9 occurs in close proximity to his citation of Gen 2:24b (“... the two will become one flesh”) in 1 Cor 6:16. Although the immediate point of the citation is to establish that “the man who joins himself to a prostitute is one body” with her (6:16), there can be little doubt that Paul would have understood its relevance for indicting

³ The motives for the inversions in the first and third sets are not hard to see. (1) The sequence of human-image-likeness in Gen 1:26 is inverted in Rom 1:23 to likeness-image-human because Paul is making a second (and secondary) intertextual echo to Ps 106:20 (LXX 105:20): “*they* (i.e. the Israelites in the golden calf episode) *exchanged* their (or: his) *glory for the likeness* of a calf eating grass.” Although the focus of Paul's charge in Rom 1:18-32 is on Gentile culpability for suppressing the truth about God, Paul also wants to anticipate the indictment of Israel in Rom 2:1-3:9. This second(ary) intertextual echo to Ps 106:20 does not discount the first to Gen 1:26-27; it simply adds to the richness of Paul's argument. (2) The sequence of male-female in Gen 1:27 is inverted to female-male in Rom 1:26-27 because Paul wants to lead off with his best argument. When Paul refers to female-female intercourse in Rom 1:26 he begins with the words “*Even* their females . . .” While many in the Greco-Roman world extolled the virtues of male-male sexual intimacy, no male in the ancient world sang the praises of lesbian intercourse. Paul thus begins with the easiest indictment of homoerotic relations first, an indictment that nearly all would concede (female-female intercourse), and then proceeds to the more disputed case in the ancient world (male-male intercourse).

homosexual practice (as also the vice of adultery mentioned in 6:9). Indeed, his use of Gen 1:27 and 2:21-22 later in the same letter (1 Cor 11:7-12), though it has problems, clearly shows that Paul regarded Gen 1:27 and 2:21-24 as vital for establishing the significance of male-female differentiation in the context of marriage.

This is one of the most obvious instances of intertextuality in the New Testament. How interesting it is that Nardelli never bothered to inform readers of these strong arguments for seeing an intertextual echo. Remember that Nardelli offers this as a key example of my “sweeping recourse to unsupported assertions.” Is this not rather a key example of Nardelli’s scholarly incompetence or duplicity—which of the two options gives him the benefit of the doubt?—in critiquing my work as a shoddy piece of scholarship?

It is easy to see why Nardelli would feel compelled to deny the obvious: This one piece of evidence all by itself shows that Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice is absolute—no exceptions for ‘non-exploitative’ or ‘egalitarian’ forms. Paul has in view not just how well or badly homosexual practice is done in the ancient world but the male-female prerequisite for sexual relations established by God at creation. Obviously, no homosexual union of any sort could pass muster given such a standard.

B. *The nature argument in Rom 1:26-27 as more than “contrary to custom”*

Of over 150 pages of discussion of Paul’s views in my first book Nardelli treats only two smaller sections. One occurs on pp. 12-14 where Nardelli attempts to take on a comment that I make on p. 386 regarding a false claim made by Dale Martin, a homosexual NT scholar who formerly taught at Duke and now at Yale:

Martin’s contention that in antiquity “homosexual desire is not itself ‘contrary to nature’” is false.⁴ To make such a claim Martin has to draw too great a divide between homoerotic desire and homoerotic action. He contends that the “‘unnaturalness’ of the desire has nothing to do with one man’s erotic interest in another, but with the ‘unnaturalness’ of a man desiring to demean himself by enthusiastically assuming the despised, lower position appropriate for women.”

Nardelli characterizes my remark as “inept, especially at this level of generality”; that “what counted for the Greeks was the act, viz. anal intercourse per se, vis-à-vis the status of those who engage into [sic] it”; that “according to nature” (*kata phusin*) was virtually the same as “according to custom/convention” (*kata nomon*). In typical fashion Nardelli mischaracterizes matters. I’m not making a generalization about what all Greeks believed but rather a specific observation what some Greco-Roman moralists and all Jews and Christians believed: namely, that all homosexual intercourse is by definition “contrary to nature” (*para phusin*). That is the major point. The minor point is that, of course, is that the desire itself, and not just the act, can be viewed as “contrary to nature.” Certainly in Rom 1:26-27 Paul speaks of the “dishonorable

⁴ Dale Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18-32,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 346.

[or: degrading] passions” of females for females and “likewise” of males who “were inflamed with their yearning for one another, males with males.” Paul focuses on both the passions and the act. Moreover, as I note on the same page of my first book,

Martin himself acknowledges that some Greco-Roman texts speak of “unnatural desires” (p. 344). Philo speaks of “abominable lusts” and a “polluted and accursed passion” (*Spec. Laws* 2.50), and “a pleasure contrary to nature” (*ibid.*, 3.39). Josephus uses the expression “pleasures which were disgusting and contrary to nature” (*Ag. Ap.* 2.275). . . . Philo could describe heterosexual desire as “passions [which] pay tribute to the laws of nature,” as opposed to the passions “of men for males” (*Contempl. Life* 59). (p. 386)

Obviously, then, homoerotic passions (and not just the act) can be labeled “contrary to nature,” precisely because they constitute desires for acts that are against nature.

Back to the major point: By *para phusin* (“beyond nature” in the sense of “contrary to, against nature”) Paul meant that the material structures of creation—here the complementary embodied character of maleness and femaleness (anatomical, physiological, psychological)—give clear evidence of God’s will for human sexual pairing. This is the obvious corollary to the natural theology in Rom 1:19-20:

The knowable aspect of God is *visible* [or: *apparent*] (*phaneron*) to them because God has *made* it *visible* [or: *apparent*] (*ephanerōsen*) to them. For *ever since the creation of the world his invisible qualities are clearly seen*, being mentally apprehended *by means of the things made*. (my emphases)

The reference to what is “visible/apparent” to observation and mental apprehension “by means of the things made” “from the creation of the world” certainly goes mere custom or convention. While Paul applies this statement specifically to the critique of idolatry, it applies as well to his critique of homosexual practice via a nature argument. This explains why Paul highlighted homosexual practice among sexual sins, alongside idolatry: both offenses require a deliberate suppression of the truth about God and about the way God made us discernable through observation of creation structures. Such a view of nature does not lend itself easily to distinctions between exploitative versus non-exploitative forms of homosexual practice or subordinate versus egalitarian models but rather presupposes an absolute rejection of all homosexual bonds.

Despite Rom 1:19-20 some have argued by ideological fiat that this could not have been what Paul intended by his nature argument. As it is, the historical context also confirms this way of reading Paul. According to Thomas Hubbard, a classicist at the University of Texas (Austin) who has written the premiere sourcebook of texts on homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome: “Basic to the heterosexual position [against homosexual practice in the Greco-Roman world of the first few centuries C.E.] is the characteristic Stoic appeal to the providence of Nature, which

has matched and fitted the sexes to each other.”⁵ Similarly, classicist Craig Williams, who has written what many regard as the definitive book on Roman homosexuality, concedes: “Some kind of argument from ‘design’ seems to lurk in the background of Cicero’s, Seneca’s, and Musonius’ claims [against homosexual practice].”⁶ Also classicist William Schoedel, emeritus of the University of Illinois, acknowledges that ancient writers “who appeal to nature against same-sex *eros* find it convenient to concentrate on the more or less obvious uses of the orifices of the body to suggest the proper channel for the more diffused sexual impulses of the body.”⁷ The second-century physician Soranus (or his later “translator” Caelius Aurelianus) referred to *molles*, “soft men” eager for penetration (i.e. the Latin equivalent for the term *malakoi* in 1 Cor 6:9), as those who “subjugated to obscene uses parts not so intended” and disregarded “the places of our body which divine providence destined for definite functions” (*On Chronic Diseases* 4.9.131). Part of Charicles’ attack on all homosexual practice in the pseudo-Lucianic text *Affairs of the Heart*, a work that contains a debate about the respective merits of heterosexual love and homosexual love, is the assertion that male-male love is an erotic attraction for what one already is as a sexual being:

Then wantonness, daring all, transgressed the laws of nature. . . . And who then first looked with the eyes at the male as at a female . . . ? One nature came together in one bed. But *seeing themselves in one another* they were ashamed neither of what they were doing nor of what they were having done to them. (19-20; my emphasis)

Nardelli refers obliquely to “the original stance of Musonius Rufus against all sexual practices between males” as “but *an idiosyncratic twist* on the old”; and, further, to “the Judeo-Christian views on homosexuality as *παρὰ φύσιν*” as “but *a radical modification* of the long-held Greek notions which a reader of Paul should be careful not to obscure to ward off Gagnon’s misunderstanding” (p. 13; my emphases). The “idiosyncratic twist” of some Greco-Roman moralists and the “radical modification” of ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity is precisely what makes all the difference in converting an argument with some semblance to “convention” or “custom” to an argument based on basic male-female structural differences leading to a radical, absolute rejection of every and any form of homosexual practice. Clearly, the misunderstanding lies with Nardelli.

To be continued....

⁵ Thomas K. Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 444.

⁶ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 242.

⁷ William R. Schoedel, “Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture* (ed. D. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 43-72, here p. 46.