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Futuo: Fifty Shades of the Roman Empire

Kathleen Mitchell Reitmayer

Ancient Rome is known for many things: the reflections of the ancient Roman Empire include advancements in art, architecture, government, law, infrastructure, and so many other important elements that would ultimately be the basis and point of comparison to advanced society even through today. On the darker side of the ancient Roman Empire are the sexual practices and social norms of the time. Excess and decadence are an important aspect of ancient Roman culture. There was little by way of modern standards outside the realm of acceptance for sexual acts in Rome with an exception to the ideas of social class. Rome openly practiced sexual acts that are considered taboo in modern times including orgies, homosexuality, incest, prostitution, and bestiality.¹ In the modern era, the idea of some of the sexual practices of ancient Roman culture is beyond acceptance. What were the rules for these sexual practices and why did the acceptance of the sexual practices of ancient Rome change so dramatically?

In the millennium and a half since the fall of Rome, social norms changed due in part to the practice of Christianity. The Christian faith took sexual practices very seriously and created rules and boundaries, supposedly from the mouth of God himself, to enforce the use of the sexual rules of the Christian faith. Many of the practices forbidden by God himself in the Christian faith were incredibly common practices in ancient Rome. By comparing and contrasting what is known about the sexual practices in the Roman Empire to what was forbidden in the Bible, conclusions can be drawn that the elements of Christianity pertaining to sexual practices was a direct affront to the sexual practices in use in ancient Rome. Christianity created the rules in regards to sexual practices that were to be acceptable and unacceptable to oppose the Roman rule of the time during the writing of the New Testament of the Bible.

The three very specific areas in which the Christian faith and the sexual practices of the Roman Empire differ are in the concepts of homosexuality, prostitution, and the issues of abstinence and sex within and outside of the rite of marriage. These key elements of difference between the Bible and the sexual practices of the Roman Empire are an important differentiation between the two sets

of beliefs. Each of these elements will be examined at length to first explain the practices in the Roman Empire and then in relation to specific verses of the Bible.

Homosexuality

Men widely practiced homosexuality in ancient Rome. Religion and culture did not forbid homosexuality. Homosexuals followed established rules and traditions to gain society's approval.² Romans did not look at homosexuality as sexual perversion but considered it a normal and natural act between two men and a sign of dominance by the victors after acts of war.³ Homosexuality, a sign of increased male sexual desire in ancient Rome, began at a young age. However, the Christian faith reviles this practice.

Ancient Rome followed simple rules for homosexuality. One who practiced homosexual sexual acts had to stay within the boundaries set mainly by ancient Greek tradition.⁴ Rules pertained to age, class standing, and role in the sexual act. They clearly defined the more masculine act as the one penetrating the other sexual partner with his penis.⁵ The man who penetrated the other partner needed to be of a higher class than the man being penetrated, either orally or anally.⁶ The age of the male being penetrated also helped decide whether or not the sexual act would be condoned. Generally, they penetrated young males, with the exception of prostitutes.⁷ Deviation from the traditions and the practices of homosexual relationships in ancient Rome did bring some consequences. Society shunned a male or considered him "less of a man," if he allowed someone of a lower class or age to penetrate him.⁸ As long as one followed the boundaries set forth for the acceptance of homosexual acts, there were no moral or legal qualms about allowing the practice of homosexual sexual acts to occur within the Roman Empire.

Within the Christian faith, the practice of homosexual sexual acts was, and on many levels is today, considered an act against God himself according to the Bible. While some of the rules against homosexuality did come from the Old Testament of the Bible, such as Leviticus 18, which is a composition of laws regarding impure acts, has a verse that reads "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination,"⁹ there were still more regulations against homosexuality in the New Testament. These references would include 1 Corinthians 6 which reads: "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor

effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”¹⁰ There are further references to the issues Christians found with homosexuality in the New Testament such as Romans, Matthew, and Ephesians.

Historians can draw several conclusions when comparing the Roman view and the Christian view of homosexual sexual acts. While homosexual acts were expressly prohibited in the Old Testament, the New Testament uses wording that excludes being both effeminate, a rule for certain men in Rome, but also regards homosexual acts as self-abuse. The wording of the Bible provides a little insight as to whether or not the rules for Christians directly related to the Romans. The separation of effeminate and sexual acts with men shows a conciseness of the general rule of Rome in ancient times regarding homosexuality and indicates they wrote these verses to oppose the general Roman society as a whole.

Prostitution

Prostitution had a major role early in the Roman Empire. Prostitution was neither illegal nor was the practice generally reviled for the first part of the Roman Empire. In fact, the practice became so important generating income that Rome itself would begin registering and taxing prostitutes for profit.¹¹ Fornication is again an issue within the Christian faith. Prostitution, although not expressly decried was and still is something the Christian faith frowns upon due to reasons of purity and marriage.

Early in the Roman Empire, the practice of prostitution was something that was simply a part of daily life. There were both male and female prostitutes available to those who wished to utilize their service.¹² Prostitution occurred in the open with no fear. The best remaining example of the openness and availability of prostitution in the Roman Empire today is the preserved city of Pompeii. Mount Vesuvius destroyed Pompeii before any laws regarding the control of prostitution, beyond taxation, could occur.¹³ Preservation of ancient brothels and the associated artwork in volcanic ash reveals a great deal about the actual practice of prostitution in early Rome. Prostitution was available all over the city. In some cases, they carved phallic symbols into the street pavement to indicate where prostitution services were available.¹⁴

In 40 AD, the Emperor Caligula imposed a tax upon prostitution

throughout Rome.¹⁵ Taxation had less to do with actually controlling prostitution, but instead with the tax revenue that could be collected from the practice of prostitution. They implemented further laws that would control the prostitutes themselves from entering into Roman society. They forced prostitutes to register with the state, and prostitutes could not wear the clothing of a noble woman.¹⁶ Additional laws, making adultery punishable by law, actually increased prostitution.¹⁷ These laws forbade women from committing adultery; however, men could still have sex with prostitutes in lieu of having an affair with a married woman.¹⁸ These laws did add a bit of shame to the practice, particularly to the prostitutes themselves; the practice of prostitution was still not a moral issue for the whole of Roman society. Prostitution was a fact of life in the Roman Empire that they have preserved in artwork and literature.

The Christian faith took issue with prostitution on a moral level. The Bible repeatedly mentioned the concept of fornication, defined as sexual intercourse between two unmarried partners. First Corinthians 6 expressly forbade the concept of fornication and separates fornicators from adulterers in verse 9 and then moves on to harlots reading, “Know ye not that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ, and make them members of a harlot? God forbid. Or know ye not that he that is joined to a harlot is one body? For, the twain, saith he, shall become one flesh.”¹⁹ Other versions of the Bible use the term ‘harlot’ to refer to a prostitute. The Bible does have many notable celebrated prostitutes while denouncing the practice. The conclusions about the relation of the rules against prostitution in the Bible are that it is very likely that the catalyst for the expressly forbidden practice of prostitution aimed at the Roman Empire. Again, when the language is studied, it is clear that there are separations. While prostitution would and should fall under the express terms about fornication, the Bible continued with the separation of adultery and fornication and lying with harlots. This could most certainly be because the Roman Empire separated these terms themselves. One could commit adultery, as it were, with a prostitute under Roman law. The use of the same and repeating terms that did not necessarily require repetition, i.e. fornicating with a prostitute is redundant. The Bible is a strong indication that the Christians were simply attacking the common practice of the Roman Empire.

Sex outside the confines of marriage

It should be clear at this point that Romans thought little was sexually inappropriate. Sex was something encouraged and celebrated within the Roman Empire as it demonstrated virility and encouraged the growth of the Empire. There was no shame for most to display sexual desire and to act on these desires within the confines allowed for their class. Sexual intercourse was something allowed for both inside and outside of marriage for men; with some rules pertaining to class and with whom the man was having intercourse. Women could not commit adultery; however, this did not apply when the husband was involved, which would generally be during orgies.²⁰ Next to homosexual acts and acts with prostitutes, the Roman orgy was a condonable and legal means to sexual gratification. The orgy was mainly something for the upper classes with Emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and Elagabalus very well known for their orgies.²¹ In the Christian world, they considered having any type of sexual intercourse outside of marriage immoral.

The Roman orgies consisted of men and women who were in some cases related and occasionally, particularly on the part of Tiberius, included children and by some accounts even infants in sexual acts.²² The orgies were generally without rules, such as those that pertained to homosexuality and prostitution. Society did not consider orgies anything out of the ordinary and allowed them for sexual gratification of anyone of the right class who attended.

The concept of orgies was and still is outside the confines of the Christian faith. Numerous passages in the Bible pertain to fornication, adultery, or any other type of sexual act outside of the confines of marriage. The books of Matthew and John expressly disapprove of fornication; First Corinthians goes into more detail about the sin of fornication and adultery. Mark 7 uses language that is a little stronger regarding adultery and fornication, which reads: "That which proceedeth out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, evil thoughts proceed, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetings, wickednesses, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, railing, pride, foolishness: all these evil things proceed from within, and defile the man."²³ While the passage goes on to speak about the Greeks, the sentiment is important in relation to the Romans. The passage did not simply frown upon orgies and sex outside of the marriage; it referred to them as born of pure evil. Again, it is clear that these rules and perceptions of evil were in reference to sexual practices of certainly the Greeks and the Romans.

Conclusion

The Roman practices of homosexuality, prostitution, and orgies are some of the major elements of the abundant sexuality known about the Roman Empire. Each of these practices had their own rules, which had little to do with the shame of the act itself and everything to do with class and social standing. The rules were in place to protect the class system and not to place judgment on the morality of the acts themselves. It is important to realize that sex in Rome had everything to do with pleasure and very little to do with morality or marriage.

The change in the perception of sexual acts for pleasure rather than simply multiplication of the species came to fruition as the Christians slowly enveloped the Roman Empire. By specifically using language that condemned the practices of prostitution, homosexuality, and polyamorous sexual relations as they were termed in Ancient Rome, the writers of the New Testament appear to have targeted the Romans and intentionally call into question the morality of the Roman way of life. The New Testament looked specifically at acts that were common practice in ancient Rome and denounced them as sinful. The creation of firmer language in the New Testament as opposed to the Old Testament regarding some of these sexual practices indicates that not only was Christianity the cause of the changes in perceptions of the acceptable sexual acts of the Roman Empire, but they wrote intentionally to denounce the sexual practices in Rome.

Notes

1. *The History of Sex*, film (New York: The History Channel, 1999).
2. Craig A. Williams, *Roman homosexuality: ideologies of masculinity in classical antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.
3. *Ibid.*, 105.
4. *Ibid.*, 15.
5. *Ibid.*, 160.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. *Sex in the ancient world: prostitution in Pompeii*, film, directed by Kurt Sayenga (New York: The History Channel, 2009).
8. Craig A. Williams, *Roman homosexuality: ideologies of masculinity in classical antiquity*

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 125.

9. Leviticus 18:22 (American Standard Version).

10. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (American Standard Version).

11. *Sex in the ancient world: prostitution in Pompeii*, film, directed by Kurt Sayenga, (New York: The History Channel, 2009).

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The economy of prostitution in the Roman world a study of social history & the brothel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 147.

16. *Sex in the ancient world: prostitution in Pompeii*, film, directed by Kurt Sayenga (New York: The History Channel, 2009).

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 (American Standard Version).

20. *Sex in the ancient world: prostitution in Pompeii*, film, directed by Kurt Sayenga (New York: The History Channel, 2009).

21. Nigel Cawthorne, *Sordid sex lives: shocking stories of perversion from Nero to Nilsen* (London: Quercus, 2010).

22. Ibid., 14.

23. Mark 7:20-23 (American Standard Version).

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