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# From Ancient Greco-Roman Culture the Contemporary LGBTQ Community: The Transfer of Sex and Power Dynamics

*Ibrahim Ibrahim*

While sexual behavior and power dynamics might be taboo topics, it is crucial to examine them for what they might reveal about social dynamics and relationships in general. These dynamics are not new and unique to our society, but rather our society has inherited them from past eras. The concept of “sex and power relations” itself suggests that relationships are often organized around domination and submission, regardless of the gender of the partners involved. This paper examines the concept of sex and power relations in 1 Corinthians and the *Judaea Capta* coin, a coin issued by the Romans after their conquest of Judea, as illustrations of the sexualized and gendered domination of Rome and subordination of Judaea.

In order to correctly analyze 1 Corinthians and the *Judaea Capta* coins, I will provide specific context by explaining the generalized Greco-Roman cultural understanding of sexual behavior. I will then examine Paul’s perspective on what he calls “sexual immorality” in 1 Corinthians, as well as the role power plays in the text—especially in light of *Judaea Capta*, which constructs the “free man” against the “feminized enslaved man.” Lastly, the paper will demonstrate the similarity between these ancient portrayals of sex and power and our contemporary society, specifically within gay male discourse of “tops” and “bottoms” – those who penetrate and those who are penetrated. Sex and power dynamics had significant impact on Greco-Roman society by asserting the rank and power of the elite, and these sex and power relations continue to persist in modern Western society, even impacting relationship organization within the LGBTQ community.

## **Greco-Roman Understandings of Power and Sexual Behavior**

In her article, “Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities,” Ruth Mazo Karras discusses the anachronism of categories and identities such as homosexual/heterosexual in the ancient world. As Karras writes, “Gender roles-masculine or feminine, active or passive-were more important than object choice in the ancient world.” Ancient Greeks and Romans lacked emphasized not the gender of their partner, but rather the roles their partner embodied. In contrast to modern notions of sexuality, ancient “sexuality” was more concerned with whether an individual was passive (penetrated) or active (penetrator). Thus, sexual experiences were more fluid in terms of gender performance. However, this fluid-

ity simply broadened the pool of submissive (or subjugated) partners to both males and females by those who are viewed as stronger males.

Those who took on a passive role would be associated with femininity, while those who took on an active role associated with masculinity. For example Karras states, "For the Romans, to penetrate other men could be a sign of masculinity (hence Valerius Asiaticus's taunt, 'Question your sons, Suillius, they'll say that I'm a man,' whereas a modern taunter might be more likely to say, "Ask your mother')." <sup>1</sup> The "taunt" demonstrates that masculinity in the ancient world was established through the domination of males at least as much as through the domination of females: power struggles were more prominent between males, given the patriarchal nature of Greco-Roman society. Thus there was a perception that the "passive" members in the ancient world were degraded. Karras continues: "It is not a category based on object choice but the taking of pleasure in passivity that Aristotle criticizes."<sup>2</sup> This attitude is indicative of the ancient world at large associating the "passive" members of their society with those lower in social hierarchy or not free citizens. They were viewed as "enslaved" because they were conquered by a stronger male, and this is consistently demonstrated in the conquest propaganda of the Roman Empire, such as the *Judaea Capta* coins.

In 1 Corinthians, too, the concepts of sex and power relations are intertwined. Paul advises the men of Corinth to avoid sexual immorality: "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?"<sup>3</sup> Sexual immorality is a chief concern for Paul as he addresses it specifically and directly in this letters.<sup>4</sup> He establishes a significant distinction between sexual sins and other sins, ranking them above all others due to the fact that they "violate" the body. In order to comprehend this distinction that Paul establishes, his cultural and social conditions as well as his purpose behind his letters must be examined. Same-sex relations were simply part of the sexual landscape in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Thus, Paul's commands regarding sexual sin reflect his environment; however, he was not responding to "homosexuality" or homosexual identities, since those did not exist. Contrary to popular belief, the original English translated text in King James Bible did not include the word "homosexuals" due to the fact that the word was not coined until 1864 by

1 Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 105, no. 4 (2000), pp. 1250-65.

2 Ibid.

3 1 Corinthians 6:18-19 (NIV)

4 Romans 1: 24, 1 Timothy 1:9-10 (NIV)

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.<sup>5</sup> However, the word “effeminate” was utilized instead, referring to male demonstration of womanly characterization, in this case passivity.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the meaning of sexual immorality changes when considering Paul’s purpose for these letters. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians reflect his apprehension of the manner in which the Corinthian community presents itself to those outside its community; the idea of sexual sin and violating the body is a metaphor for not violating the “greater” body, the Corinthian community.<sup>7</sup> As Karras notes, Foucault’s theory on sexuality in ancient Greece includes that “the regulation of the aphrodisi . . . sensual pleasures. . . was a matter of the health of the body and mind rather than a matter of morality.” This provides additional contexts to Paul’s behavior and attitude towards sexual immorality. Since he is extremely concerned with the well being of the Corinthian community, he utilizes the concept of sin to provide additional reasoning to prohibit the community from “harming” itself. At this point, the subject of power and sexual relationships emerge in 1 Corinthians. The power of the community as a whole lies within the fact that it is extremely united, strong, and *impenetrable*. This notion of representing the strength of a community, whether it is an empire, a nation, or a city, through sex is not exclusive to 1 Corinthians and Paul, as the *Judea Capta* coin will indicate.

After the end of the Roman Jewish War in 70 CE, coins circulated throughout the Roman Empire that portrayed the Roman conquest of Judea. These coins also illustrate the way social roles are organized around dominance and submission or the penetrable and impenetrable. Here, the characteristics of the penetrable are made more explicit. The coin depicts “captured, bound, draped and seated” female or male bodies, and the theme of dominated men by other men also reoccurs.<sup>8</sup> The characterization of the “captured Judaea” illustrates the submissive and penetrated people, the “enslaved” and “conquered” body. On the other hand, the coin portrays the dominant and penetrating males as the “free” and “conquering” body.<sup>9</sup> These illustrations on public items such as coins demonstrate the significance of domination within Roman masculinity and the society at large. Karras further explains the role of domination and its connection to social status:

Masculinity in ancient Rome was a very fragile condition but necessary for public manifestations of rank and authority . . . the importance of impenetrability to Roman concepts of man- hood . . . To be the pas-

5 Rictor Norton, “The Term ‘Homosexual,’” *A Critique of Social Constructionism and Postmodern Queer Theory*, June 19, 2008, <http://www.rictornorton.co.uk/social14.htm>.

6 1 Corinthians 6:9 (KJV)

7 Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Chelsea, Michigan: Yale University Press, 1995), 3-37.

8 Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 36-37.

9 Ibid.

sive partner in a sexual relation was . . . to have . . . the experience . . . that of a slave or freedman . . . the penetration of a soldier by a sword was equivalent to sexual penetration.<sup>10</sup>

Those who penetrate were associated with the powerful and elite; however, those who were penetrated were associated with the lower social ranks. This resulted in the fact that “same-sex relations... [were] far more acceptable among elites than among the masses . . . and that the latter condemned both the active and the passive partner.”<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, these negative associations with penetration remain within our society, especially in the gay community.

### **Sexual Behavior and Power Dynamics in the LGBTQ Community**

Tension between tops and bottoms in the gay community continues to increase as homosexuality becomes more acceptable in American culture. This conflict between the two sexual preferences in the male homosexual community might be attributed to the heterosexual concept of masculinity. Tops are viewed as more masculine and more acceptable than bottoms because they maintain the characteristic of the impenetrable male. On the other hand, bottoms are not as accepted by heterosexuals because they allow their bodies to be “emasculated” and penetrated. This is extremely problematic due to the fact that it causes division, inequality, and discrimination amongst homosexuals. Bottoms are viewed as more feminine, weaker and ultimately “lesser” than their tops counterparts. Therefore, the notion of the dominant penetrating male is once again upheld as superior.

Mass media and social media have served as a playground for discrimination against and shaming of bottoms. For instance, a recent video that circulated social media portrays a top gay man providing “rules” that a Tops Meeting established for bottoms. In the video, the speaker states that rule number one is to “know the dick that you signed [up] for . . . now you get to the toss place and you [are] like ‘what is this . . . hold on . . . give me a minute . . . don’t go so deep.’ This is the dick you signed up for.”<sup>12</sup> Although this claim may contain a valid argument that bottoms should be aware and knowledgeable about their bodies and capabilities, it does not justify tops being careless and indifferent with regard to the well being of their sexual partners. Likewise, the tone and language used to express his thoughts demonstrates disdain towards bottoms who have second thoughts about being involved in a sexual act. Further he states,

10 Karras, “Active/Passive,” 1261.

11 *Ibid.*, 1256-1257.

12 “5 Things Tops Want Bottoms to Know,” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiMwVDPwGKQ>.

Rule number 4: don't think that if you're taking to someone they are willing to do everything to get sex . . . Gas is \$17/gallon. Who is gonna come pick you up for ass? Who does that?! Do you want a dick like that?! If he is that thirsty to pick you up, take you to his house to fuck and bring you back to your house. Is that the dick you want?! That's not the ass we want!<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the first "rule," this example does not contain any logical or acceptable argument. He once again shames bottoms for asking to be treated with respect. The questions he raises after stating the "rule" simply reiterate the shaming, and he directs this shaming not only towards bottoms, but also tops. Looking back to ancient times, Karras includes in her article an analysis of misconceptions of the "penetrated" males: "In classical Athens the penetrated were not seen as the inert objects of someone else's gratification . . . and wait for things to be done to them . . . The *kinaidos/katapugon* is not a sexual pathic, humiliated and made effeminate by repeated domination . . . who dresses up to attract men and has sex at the drop of a hat." Although this reference to the negative characteristics associated with the "penetrated" body refers to ancient misconceptions, it is clearly still relevant to contemporary society. Lastly, simply the fact that there are "rules" which individuals with a specific sexual preference impose upon others is extremely degrading. These rules and those that endorse them treat bottoms as nothing but a mere instrument for the pleasure of the dominant male. This is one of the most crucial issues in which the context of power dramatically affects sexual relationships. Although "hookups" and "one-night-stands" are more common in our contemporary society, it does not give permission for either of the parties, especially tops in this case, to treat sexual partners as an object.

Though a video similar to the one discussed above is extremely problematic, it is not likely to reach audience outside of the LGBTQ community. However, bottom shaming has also taken place in a mainstream television show that non queer-identified people are more likely to watch. Episode "Rapture's Delight" of the television series "American Dad" depicts a gay couple, yet only the top is "saved" from the apocalypse because "apparently God does loves gays, but only if they are tops."<sup>14</sup> Although one can dismiss this outrageous statement as comedic, it will not remove its problematic nature. Due to the fact that "American Dad" is a mainstream series, it is very likely that this series is the only exposure to homo-

13 Ibid.

14 "Rapture's Delight." IMDb.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1555452/>, "Gay News, God Loves Gays," YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g\\_sCndvIKCY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_sCndvIKCY).

sexual relationships some viewers have had. Thus, when “American Dad” presents the dynamics between tops and bottoms in such a manner, it reiterates ancient Greco-Roman condemnation of bottoms and bottom shaming in our society.

Sexual behavior and power relations are no unique character to American society, but rather a global phenomenon occurring across the LGBTQ community. For example, Latino gay males refer to tops as “activos” and bottoms as “pasivos,” which resonates with the Greco-Roman ideology of sexual behavior in terms of labels. However, terminology is not the only place in the Latino LGBTQ community where Greco-Roman ideology of sexual behavior persists; it also resonates in larger cultural perceptions: “While the pasivo role is associated with femininity and a man who is penetrated is seen as less of a man, the activo role in anal sex carries less stigma and at times may even enhance the social standing of the performer.”<sup>15</sup> Another example of global demonstration of sex and power dynamics is pornography in Russia.

Another series of explicit sexual images created in Gulag camps and prisons were less concerned with expressing desire (although this cannot be excluded), but with cementing hierarchies of power. Tattoos branded members of Russian prisons’ most “degraded” (opushchennyi) caste, known as *petukhi*, those who were deemed sexually accessible for oral and anal intercourse to all “real men” (*muzhiki*, *patsany*).<sup>16</sup>

This statement clearly exemplifies the utilization of sex and power to establish a concrete social hierarchy. Once again, the idea that penetrated men are not “real men” and lesser than their penetrator counterparts resurfaces, this time in an even more explicit and hostile manner. When considered together, these examples illustrate the unquestionable resonance of active/passive inequality and discrimination in our society as well as LGBTQ communities in other nations.

After analyzing ancient as well as contemporary evidence, there is an unshakable resonance with and inheritance of Greco-Roman ideology of sex and power dynamics in our society, especially within discourse between gay men. In 1 Corinthians, two of Paul’s chief concerns are demonstrations of sex and power relations. Sexual immorality was a central metaphor for demonstrating the Corinthian community as a perfect and impenetrable body; thus power and impenetrability are utilized as interchangeable concepts. The condemnation of taking pleasure in passivity is also included in 1 Corinthians, which continues the tradition of viewing those who are “passive” as immoral and socially lesser. Further, the Roman Empire’s con-

15 Alex Carballo-Díéguez, Curtis Dolezal, Luis Nieves, Francisco Diaz, Carlos Decena and Ivan Balan, “Looking for a Tall, Dark, Macho Man . . . Sexual-Role Behaviour Variations in Latino Gay and Bisexual Men,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6, no. 2 (2004): 160.

16 Dan Healey, “Active, Passive, and Russian: The National Idea in Gay Men’s Pornography,” *The Russian Review* (2010), 210-30.

quest of Judea was expressed as the subjugation of a weak and vulnerable male or female, while the powerful and dominating Rome was illustrated as a powerful and masculine man. These negative categorizations carry through into our contemporary society, where homosexual bottoms are discriminated against and stigmatized more frequently in comparison to their tops counterparts. Though such discrimination emerges from a heteronormative society that favors active males over passive females, it also resonates with the Greco-Roman ideology of sexual behavior and power relations. Some evidence of prejudice against bottoms can be found within the gay community, while others can be observed in mainstream media. Most importantly, these messages of prejudice resonate across the globe and not only in American LGBTQ community, which drastically increases the significance of the issue. Though many believe that our society has surpassed “primitive” bigotry against homosexuals, these issues clearly persist, and some gay men experience it daily. We might make ourselves believe that we have exceeded such notions as discrimination against sexual minorities, but examining ancient texts and culture proves that we still ascribe to their “primitive” views of sexual behaviors.

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