

Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations
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The time has come to take stock of where we are at present on reading Biblical passages pertinent to discussions of same-sex affectional or erotic preferences. There are two reasons: a critical mass of published and public discussion of the topic by scholars, and a high level of interest in the public arena. Many Christians are holding intense discussions and writing position papers on the status of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people within Christian circles. Scholarship on the topic sometimes comes into being precisely to address denominational discussions (Seow, 1996). Indeed, one may say that any scholarship on the topic emerges within the contemporary debate. Hence it can and does have an impact on the lives of men and women. Since all scholarship affects these discussions, an understanding of reading strategies in publications on the topic is crucial.

Premise

This paper assumes that Biblical passages germane to contemporary discussions (Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13; Romans 1: 26-7; I Corinthians 6:9; I Tim 1:10) have in common, albeit for different reasons, and notwithstanding divergent understandings of same-sex affectional preference and gender issues, censure of same-sex erotic relations. As far as the New Testament is concerned, this condemnation is made within a context in which male and female same-sex affectional preferences existed and were known to exist. I am not going to defend this reading here. It is clearly argued in scholarship on the topic (Furnish, 1979; 1985). The most recent important study discusses new primary material about lesbians in the Roman period (Brooten, 1996). Early Christian condemnation of sexual relations between women align Christian with Roman writers of the period. Concentrating on female homoeroticism

exposes Christian (and Roman) condemnation since female homoeroticism transgressed Roman norms for sexual relations: a male active partner and a female passive partner. Some Roman sources express toleration for male same-sex relations. Thus, the sexual affection of women for other women contravened ancient ideas about what was "natural." This opprobrium occasions particular wrath in early Christian sources: female same-sex relations transgress the natural order of gendered hierarchy. Based on this reading of the Biblical evidence, I want to ask two questions: Why and how do gay and lesbian people today engage in a religious system where one source of authority is intrinsically oppressive? What apologetic strategies do scholars and writers engage in on behalf of the Biblical record?

Argument

It seems to me that there are two main reading strategies evident in contemporary books and articles on same-sex relations and the Biblical record: a strategy of restoration, and a strategy of completion. In all both cases, I will explain what the strategy is, how it works, and the result. To demonstrate how it works, I will use writings of contemporary scholars in English, particularly those whose influence is widespread. By "widespread" I mean "cited frequently" whether verbally or orally. At the end of the discussion, I will evaluate the strategies themselves.

Reading Strategies

The strategy of restoration

This strategy argues that the Biblical record or a particular passage does not address contemporary debates about same-sex affectional preferences because it is really about something else. One could call this displacement. However, the outcome of this strategy is much more than mere relocation ("instead of x read y") since the result is exoneration of the Biblical record. A scholar explains and defends the proper way to view the Biblical passage. Homosexual persons, or their conduct, hitherto thought to be the subject of the passage, are in fact subordinate to something else. This

"something else" is truer to the biblical record. The authority of the Bible thus remains intact.

a. Paul in Romans 1 is really writing about the consequences of idolatry (Furnish, 1979, 1985; Martin, 1995). His writings therefore cannot be made to speak to contemporary questions about homosexuality.

Furnish states that homosexuality is not a prominent biblical concern. Sodom is a symbol for the reality of God's judgment, not a symbol for homosexuality. Paul knows nothing of the modern terms "homosexual," "bisexual," and "heterosexual." Romans 1 is a denunciation of the Gentiles formulated in accord with Jewish reasoning. They chose to worship gods of their own making although God's power was evident in the created order. The vices typical of Gentile society (one of which is homosexual intercourse) are evidence of God's anger. It is one of the consequences of the Gentile sin of refusing to let the one true God be their God. Idolatry, not a specific vice is sinful. In contrast with other scholars, Furnish aligns Paul's condemnation of male and female homosexual practices with those of secular moralists like Plutarch, Seneca, and Dio Chrysostom. He also connects it to rabbinic teaching. But he notes that Paul's condemnation is abstract rather than based on specific cases. Thus we cannot expect Paul to answer questions faced in the modern church. Moreover, contemporary homosexual behavior need not involve the sexual exploitation evident in Paul's time. Any exploitation of another whether ancient or modern stands under the judgment of scripture.

Martin points out that since Paul's argument in Romans 1 is based on the assumption that polytheism led to homosexuality, the background against which to read the passage is not the creation accounts of Genesis 1-3 but Jewish accounts of the origins of polytheism like those of I Enoch and Jubilees. In Romans 1 Paul refers to gentile culture rather than the human condition. Thus he speaks about "gentile ethnic impurity" rather than "universal concupiscence." There is no notion of a homosexual

orientation in antiquity and what is "unnatural" meant "in excess of what is natural." Misinterpreting Paul as referring to universal human sinfulness (Martin has Hays 1994 in mind) rather than to a gentile practice constitutes not only heterosexism but also homophobia; when homosexuality is viewed as that which threatens us from within, such scholars provide the theological basis for watchdog activities.

b. In Romans 1 Paul is really writing about homosexual acts done by heterosexual persons acting "contrary to nature" and not about homosexuals (Boswell, 1980; McNeill, 1993). Moreover, this passage did not cause Christian anti-gay feelings in Western Christian tradition.

McNeill discusses the phrase *para physin*, "against nature" in Romans 1:26 at some length. The phrase could refer to the individual pagan who "having abandoned" (aorist participle) natural uses of sexuality goes beyond his own sexual appetites in order to indulge in new pleasures. Paul apparently refers only to homosexual acts indulged in by those he considered to be otherwise heterosexually inclined; acts which represent a voluntary choice to act contrary to their ordinary sexual appetite. Thus, the Pauline epistles do not treat the problem of homosexual activity between persons who share the homosexual condition and as such cannot be read as explicitly condemning such behavior.

c. In Romans 1:26-7 Paul is really writing about purity regulations and not about contemporary same-sex relations (Countryman, 1988). Paul in Romans 1 does not apply the vocabulary of sin to homosexual acts. Homosexual acts are a dirty part of Gentile culture, visited upon the Gentiles as recompense for sins including idolatry and social disruption. New Testament ethics, framed in terms of property values and purity systems, remove them from our own time. We, on the other hand, may choose to engage with our own cultural codes and mores in the same way that NT writers did.

d. In Romans 1 Paul is really writing about same-sex man-boy affection in the ancient world and not about contemporary same-sex relations (Scroggs, 1983). Biblical injunctions are not necessarily eternal ethical truths independent of historical and cultural context. If they are to have meaning today, biblical statements must be consonant with larger ethical judgments at the heart of scripture and the context today must bear a reasonable similarity to the context of the statements at the time of writing. What the New Testament opposed was homosexuality as pederasty in its more sordid and dehumanizing dimensions. Since adult homosexuality within Christian groups today is that of caring mutual relationships between consenting adults, Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate.

e. In Romans 1 Paul is really writing about non-procreative sexual activity which is viewed in the Bible and Christian tradition as deviant (Gomes, 1996). Because we know more about homosexuality today, we should not define it as a sin, or as sickness or perversion.

Gomes writes from within the Christian tradition as a Baptist minister who is the chaplain to Harvard University. His book received enthusiastic endorsement from a past Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie who called it, "the best contemporary book on the Bible for thoughtful people." The chapter on homosexuality is called "The Bible and Homosexuality: The Last Prejudice." It begins by summarizing the Biblical basis for an aversion to homosexuality:

"Homosexuality is an abomination, and the homosexual is a sinner. At Sodom and Gomorrah God punished the cities for the sin of homosexuality. Saint Paul and the early Christians were equally opposed to homosexuality, and homosexual practices are condemned in the New Testament church. Therefore, if we are to be faithful to the "clear teachings of scripture," we too must condemn homosexuality; it is the last moral absolute, and we compromise it at our own peril." (Gomes, 1996, 145).

In the contemporary climate of prejudice and gay-bashing made possible by such interpretations of the Bible, Gomes argues that no credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals can be made from the Bible "unless one chooses to read scripture in a way that simply sustains the existing prejudice against homosexuality and homosexuals." The Bible, in fact, has little to say on the topic of homosexuality. Jesus himself does not mention it and it is absent from the prophetic material. Indeed, the word itself was invented in the nineteenth century.

Gomes takes each Biblical passage in turn: Genesis 1-2 is not "a paradigm about marriage" but rather, a description of human society. It is a weak argument from silence to conclude that the omission of some social configurations in the creation narratives implies censure. Sodom and Gomorrah is not about sodomy but about pride (Ezekiel 16:48-9) or lack of hospitality as Jesus indicates (Mt 10:14-15). The attempted homosexual rape of the angels at Lot's door is not the subject of the story, even though, like heterosexual rape, it is an abomination before God. It is reductionist to claim that "the instance of homosexual rape..invalidates all homosexuals or all homosexual activity." The historical context of Leviticus is cultural identity, protection, and procreation. Homosexual conduct jeopardizes all three. Anyway, Christians are not bound by the Holiness Code since Gentiles have the gift of the Holy Spirit without the Law of Israel (Acts 10:47). Homosexuality in this passage denotes ritual impurity and not intrinsic wrong. It is an abomination because the Gentiles do it. Romans 1 is not about homosexuality but about the fallen nature of humankind of which homosexuality is one consequence. Looking at Romans through the vocabulary of the nineteenth century tends to collapse the distinction between Paul's world and ours. Paul is in fact speaking of passions out of control. The passage addresses heterosexual people who performed homosexual acts. Paul knows homosexuality as pederasty and male prostitution and condemns heterosexual men and women who engage in these practices. He knows nothing about a homosexual

nature. Paul's ignorance should not excuse our own. We cannot base the church's principled objections to homosexuality and homosexuals on Paul's imperfect knowledge. I Cor. 6:9 is not about homosexuality but about the moral imperfections of the Gentile sin of idolatry. The term "sodomite" in I Tim 1:10 is a male prostitute and thus nothing to do with our understanding of the term "homosexual." Gomes' summary asserts that the biblical writers had no notion of monogamous faithful persons living out the implications of the gospel.

What follows is an account of his self-disclosure at a rally in Harvard yard in which "as the university's pastor and preacher, as a Christian, and as a homosexual, I decided to reclaim by proclaiming a vision of the gospel that was inclusive rather than exclusive, and to do so as a Christian who was more than the sum of the parts of which I was made" (Gomes, 1996, 164). The whole experience and the tempest that follows his disclosure confirms for Gomes that fear covering prejudice lies at the heart of homophobia just as of racism. The Bible condemns any kind of nonproductive sex. In the writings of Augustine and Aquinas the homosexual becomes a threat to the moral order and deviant. Today we acknowledge the unitive as well as the procreative function of sexual relations. This opens up the possibility that permanent, monogamous, same-sex committed relationships can signify a natural good (Gomes, 1996, 172).

The strategy of omission

A natural development of the strategy of restoration is omission. This reading strategy argues that the Biblical material contains nothing directly pertinent to contemporary debates on (some) same-sex relations.

a. Romans 1 is not about women who have an erotic preference for women but heterosexual women engaging in sexual practices "contrary to nature" (Miller, 1995). The phrase describing what is "contrary to nature" probably refers to heterosexual oral or anal intercourse; there is little evidence in Paul's environment for a concept of

homosexuality common to both females and males. Moreover, the passage does not explicitly refer to female same-sex affectional preference.

b. The silence of the gospels and Jesus on the topic of same-sex relations indicates its lack of importance (Spong, 1988). While acknowledging that an argument from silence is not a strong one, the "inconclusiveness found in the Hebrew Scriptures" together with the "total silence on this issue in Matthew, Mark, Luke/Acts, and John" can weigh heavily when considering the Pauline texts.

A variation on the strategy of omission is the argument that a biblical passage addresses a specific homoerotic act rather than all homoerotic acts between men and men or women and women. For example, Saul Olyan has shown that Lev 18:22 and 20:13 prohibit anal intercourse but not other male homoerotic acts (Olyan, 1994). He also shows that Lev 18:22 is not directed toward the receptive partner in anal intercourse but toward the insertive partner. Thus Lev 18 does not prohibit sexual relations between females.

The strategy of completion

This is a strategy of reading the biblical text which begins by acknowledging that biblical material on homosexuality or same-sex relations is condemnatory. This reading is juxtaposed with other biblical material and conclusions are then drawn for contemporary readers. The strategy both excludes and includes same-sex relations.

a. Although only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all of them express unqualified disapproval (Hays, 1994). Romans 1 diagnoses the disordered human condition in which homosexual behavior appears as the consequence of idolatry and one in a list of symptoms occasioned by turning away from God and falling under the power of sin. The broader scriptural framework however suggests several things to modern readers: God made man and woman for one another and that sexual desires find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage; we are all in bondage to sin through our existence in the flesh which only the resurrection can transform; some New

Testament passages commend the celibate life as a way of faithfulness. The wider context of Romans means that self-righteous judgment is just as sinful as homosexual behavior (2:1); that the entire human condition is fallen; that final transformation of our physical state awaits the resurrection; and that some NT passages clearly commend the celibate life as a way of faithfulness.

b. Paul's words in Romans 1 are better viewed not in isolation but within his notion of a new creation (Hall, 1996). The modern reader, concluding from a reading of Paul that homosexual acts are sinful, would do well to ask how the ancient reader would have heard this text. The whole letter would have been read and the argument in Romans would have been familiar as the degradation of Gentile life without God from which the Jew also is not exempt. Galatians 3:26-28, I Cor 7, and 8-10 indicate that Paul's "new creation" is not a change of state but a community within which there is a diversity of expression just as there is a multiplicity of spiritual gifts. What has held authority in the past is made relative. No set of rules guarantees faithfulness to the new creation. Specific injunctions must not override the sense of the whole.

c. Two things may be said: teachings on homosexuals in scripture are not to the fore and to whatever extent they are discussed they are condemned without exception (Miller, 1996). In a collection of essays written by faculty of Princeton Seminary specifically to address the topic from within the Reformed tradition, Miller nevertheless maintains that interpretation of scripture should not happen apart from a wider context: the rule of faith and the rule of love. While the understanding of scripture in the Reformed tradition is informed by creeds and confessions, the gospel and the grace of God has preeminence. Moreover, Scripture itself encourages reflection on experience, and this is where we find ourselves in the present.

My own preference is for this strategy of completion. It identifies and takes seriously the attitude of condemnation toward same-sex affectional preference, at least as far as Romans 1 is concerned. It takes seriously a similar condemnation on the part of

patristic writers in Christian tradition. Thanks to the work of Brooten, we cannot take ancient censure of same-sex affectional preferences as abstract. Clearly, in his attitude toward male and female same-sex relations, Paul stood in a continuum with pagan contemporaries.

Our understanding of Romans 1 must indeed be informed by the language of purity regulations and ancient codes of honor and shame. But these interpretations cannot eclipse the social reality of the world of Paul. Nor can they explain a history of interpreting Romans 1 as censorship.

Taking seriously the condemnation of Romans 1 does not privilege that text over all others. It does not, for example, describe the universal human condition. To take the authority of the Bible seriously warrants juxtaposing Romans 1 with other parts of scripture, and with the lived experience of gay and lesbian people as part of the community of Christ.

The African American experience of living with a literary tradition that condones slavery is helpful. For example, from the late eighteenth century through to the end of slavery, the period of Reconstruction, and into the modern civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, the most popular reading of the Bible was both critical and accommodationist: respect for the Protestant canon and a desire to be included in the American political and religious mainstream balanced by a radical prophetic critique of Bible-believing, slave-holding, racist America. New Testament passages like Gal. 3.26-8, Acts 2 and 10.34-36 emphasizing the universality of salvation emerged prominently in discourses of civil rights and sermons (Wimbush 1993). A less accommodationist option is that of Howard Thurman's grandmother who cut out passages from Paul after hearing the white preacher preach continually from Ephesians on the obedience of slaves to masters. The result was that when Howard Thurman got to theological school, he asked his grandmother why he had not heard much about Paul! (Gomes 1996: 50). Her argument was that Paul was inconsistent

with what Jesus taught. Both civil rights discourses and excisions of Paul preserve the authority of the tradition.

What about the pro-slavery arguments? In 1844 Patrick Hues Mell published a tract designed to show that 'slavery is not a moral evil'. Slavery 'is directly sanctioned by the letter of the Scriptures' (Meeks 1996). Indeed, an analysis of 275 pro-slavery treatises, tract, and sermons by clergymen from colonial times through to the Civil War reveals that scripture was the most important source for establishing the morality of slavery' (Tise 1987).

Meeks perceptively points out how difficult it is to state clearly why the pro-slavery readers of the Bible were wrong and even more difficult to enunciate interpretative rules that might help us to avoid making equally disastrous mistakes if we claim the Bible as norm in ethical issues we face today. He suggests possible strategies. The first is 'immutable principles'. By this is meant that the apologists failed to acknowledge the historical conditionedness of the biblical rules and admonitions. It would be absurd to apply to modern situations rules shaped in a vastly different culture. However, which biblical norms are not products of particular times, people, or circumstances? The issue of discernment is formidable. Are there modern biblical scholars not blinded by self-interest?

Meeks calls a second strategy 'the golden age'. By this, one might argue the falling away of earlier egalitarian impulses in favor of later more rigid social arrangements (the move, for example, from the early baptismal formula of Galatians to the household codes of Colossians). Such reconstructions are only probable at best. And even if one could agree on a reconstruction, why is the earlier necessarily 'better?' And what are the means by which an ideological argument might persuade opponents? Slavery ceased to have an ethical claim in American society because a war was won and lost.

Of a third strategy, that of 'intuition', whereby we might suspect the abolitionist reading of scripture to be more correct than the pro-slavery reading, Meeks asks whether one can find ways to look squarely at the biblical record and say, nevertheless, at this moment God wills something quite different from the beliefs and practices of the biblical age?

He concludes that while there are no magical rules of hermeneutics to ensure that a scripture-based judgement will be right, there are indications that go toward the shaping of a moral intuition. One might listen to the weaker partner in every relationship of power. Very few people in the eighteenth century were prepared to hear what slaves were hearing the Bible say, or just hearing what they themselves said. Thus, a rule of thumb emerging for ethical use of the Bible is that whenever the Christian community seeks to reform itself, it must ensure that among those voices interpreting the tradition are those of the ones who have experienced harm from that tradition.

Evaluation

Each reading strategy takes the authority of the Bible seriously. The first reading strategy of restoration, even while it restores a correct reading of the biblical text to the modern reader (idolatry; homosexual acts done by heterosexual persons; pederasty; purity laws; non-procreative activity), thereby putting a reading of homosexuality in its proper place, does so without undermining the authority of the Bible. For the Bible speaks to that other restored issue and it is on that issue that the Bible is authoritative. In some cases, biblical authority speaks both to the restored issue and to the minor issue since it criticizes both. For instance, if Romans 1 is really about pederasty, and not homosexuality, the Bible could still be invoked to criticize pederasty because it is exploitative (Scroggs 1983; Gomes 1996). Even if Romans 1 is really about purity laws which might be regarded as without influence today, contemporary readers can still use the biblical modes to engage in a similar debate

with the cultural context in which they live. Even if there is in the biblical record pertinent to homosexuality, as in the case of the reading strategy of omission, the authority of the biblical record is not itself thereby undermined. It still speaks on other issues.

The extent to which biblical authority is taken seriously may be shown by the eclipse of ancient sources referring to male and female same-sex relations in one example of the strategy of restoration. What is restored is not evidence of the lives of homosexual men and women but the authority of the Bible. This means, among other things, that the focus of the interpretation is not the censoring aspect of Romans 1.

Perhaps others share my feelings of bewilderment after surveying examples of the first strategy. If Romans 1 is not about same-sex relations, how do I know what it is about? How can I choose between the interpretations? Or can the passage be about idolatry and pederasty, purity laws and confused heterosexuals? In the first place, we can give some credence to those interpretative options that strive to take the ancient context seriously. Thus, we can take less seriously the interpretation that Romans 1 describes heterosexuals acting in a homosexual fashion. The ancient world knew of far more divergence in sexuality than simply hetero- or homosexual. As for the idolatry and pederasty interpretations of Romans 1, they are helpful but incomplete. Neither exhausts the specific details of Rom. 1.26-28. It is hard to be sure that the specific terms in Romans 1 refer to forms of pederasty. The terms from Romans 1 that occur elsewhere used to speak of pederasts occur here. Moreover, pederasty simply does not apply to women. Scanning all these options, in addition to others I have not included, suggests that behind this interpretative strategy lies something else.

Recognition of the importance (perhaps primacy) of biblical authority to the reading strategies of restoration, omission, and completion means that we can recognize the purpose of each strategy. It is to enable the modern reader to address a vexing modern issue while retaining confidence in the authority of the Bible and remaining

within the Christian tradition. This is a very different issue than an investigation of the texts.

Conclusion

Recognition of these reading strategies allows us to respect their intention and purpose. They each have a valid place. The first two succeed in providing readers with the means to assess passages apparently condemnatory of same-sex relations and still subscribe to the notion of biblical authority. The strategy of completion has the merit of taking the condemnation seriously. By providing a wider interpretative framework in which to view the original condemnation, scripture functions to interpret scripture, whether restrictively or openly. When that wider interpretative framework includes the actual experiences of men and women in same-sex relations seeking in communities to live out the reality of their faith, discernment includes the reading strategy of human lives.

Moreover, it is to the experience of lesbians that particular attention needs to be paid. For in the history of Christian tradition, only the investigation of these lives lays bare the condemnation of Romans 1 and patristic interpretation in Christian tradition. Without that focus, and in the denial of these lives, an incomplete and assimilationist history is written. It is to counteract that history that the present history is written.

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