

Lot's Wife Looked Back

The Enduring Attractions of Sodom for Biblical Commentators

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Review of Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); and Ken Stone (ed.), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001).

Introduction

[1] Lord Alfred Douglas's oft-quoted reference to "the love that dare not speak its name" was, even in its time, not entirely accurate. By the 1890s there existed in England a body of writing, which either advocated resistance to homophobia or explored or justified homosexual love. In the late eighteenth-century Edmund Burke (1729-1797) had denounced the cruel and often fatal practice of putting homosexuals in the pillory or sentencing them to death. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) argued that homophobia should be resisted, though in papers unpublished until the 1980s (Aldrich: 69-70; Fone: 272-78). Like later nineteenth-century writers such as Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and A. E. Housman, he based his arguments on the pederasty and male bonding of ancient Greece and Rome. Ancient Near Eastern scholarship was in its infancy and relevant texts from the Bible were not considered, apart from references to David and Jonathan who might be invoked as patrons of pederasty (McCormack: 41-42; for a general discussion of the period, see Dowling). However, the sordid reality of London's homosexual underworld revealed during the trial of Oscar Wilde brought an abrupt end to these mannered academic apologias and poetic celebrations of male same-sex love.

[2] When the ensuing silence was broken in the mid-twentieth century, it was within the Christian tradition and looked to the Bible and church practice rather than the classics for guidance. D. S. Bailey's seminal work paved the way for a series of studies that increasingly sought to find some Biblical support for homosexual love or to ameliorate the uncomfortable words of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:24-26, and the fiery fate of the men (and women and children) of Sodom in Genesis 19.¹ During the 1980s and 1990s this became the majority tradition as liberal mainstream Protestant denominations in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere grappled in the public arena with homosexual behavior, relationships, and ordination. In the most recent example of this approach, M. Nissinen, after a thorough examination of homoeroticism in ancient Near Eastern texts and the Bible, ruefully noted that it was probable that no biblical author approved of homoeroticism in any form they encountered. Moreover, it seemed impossible to bridge the social and cultural gap between then and now. That said, he concluded

¹ He remarked, "I have ignored the pederastia of the Greeks" (vii). Other well-known works that followed included McNeill, Horner, Boswell, Scroggs, Helminiak, and Brooten.

that love had to be the controlling hermeneutical principle and a priority in dealing with the “uncomfortable” texts on homosexuality (123-40).

[3] This liberal position has been challenged in the two recent books that feature in this review article. Robert Gagnon reaffirms that the Bible is utterly hostile to any manifestation of homoeroticism as contrary to the divine will expressed in Scripture and displayed in the created order. Any attempt to soften the overwhelmingly unfavorable texts by the hermeneutics of love cannot be sustained. In stark contrast, the authors of the collection of essays edited by Ken Stone apply a “queer” hermeneutic to the Hebrew Bible in an effort to transcend and/or negate both conservative and liberal interpretations. Published in the first year of the twenty-first century these books protest the status quo and vigorously advance the debate. Each work will be examined in turn, compared and contrasted and some concluding observations offered.²

The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Gagnon

[4] The introduction explores the author’s reasons for writing the book, which are not wholly academic. The central portion of the book is a focused scholarly examination of those narratives and texts in the Bible that spur the debate. The scholarship is mature and exacting: it persuasively enunciates the conventional interpretation and relentlessly assails the liberal camp. The closing section addresses the hermeneutical relevance of the Bible’s witness for the Christian community and for society at large, from the author’s perspective.

[5] No scholarship is unbiased, and Gagnon is forthright about making his personal disquiet at homosexuality and practicing homosexuals very clear. Based on the witness of authoritative scripture, he believes that the only way a homosexual can be received into the Christian community is to refrain from homosexual activity or, ideally, to undergo counseling or psychotherapy and find fulfillment and acceptance in a monogamous heterosexual marriage (420-29). He paints a devastating picture of “The Negative Effects of Societal Endorsement of Homosexuality,” remarks on the financial drain of HIV/AIDS on the health care system, and cites data that show homosexuals are more likely to be pedophiles than heterosexuals (471-86). A theme to which he returns is the sheer unnaturalness of homosexual intercourse - the penis is intended for the vagina and *vice versa*. Gagnon suggests that for church and society to affirm same-sex intercourse leads to death - spiritually, morally, and physically - and that homosexual actions are “sinful and harmful to the perpetrators, to the church and to society at large” (493). In fact, the reader is juggling two narratives at once, the scholarly work and the meta-narrative, which reveals Gagnon’s motivation and examines the negative connotations of homosexual conduct for church and society at large.

[6] Gagnon is palpably concerned not to be labeled homophobic, intolerant, or outmoded as he urges his conservative position. Opening the book the reader is at once presented with “Praise for

² Those who continued to uphold the opinion that Scripture and ecclesiastical tradition unequivocally condemned homosexuality usually came from the extreme Christian religious right, the camp of Falwell and Robertson, and hence were easily dismissed. Any writings emerging from a more mainstream and intellectual conservatism remained a minority and were relegated to the domain of the unenlightened by the prevailing liberal ideology. Gagnon lists some of those. He notes that in four recent collections of essays on the Bible and homosexuality, less than one-third of the authors oppose same-sex intercourse (39 n. 5).

The Bible and Homosexual Practice” from some sixteen scholars, presumably to convince her of the importance of this book. His work is guided by three evaluating principles: that the revealed authority of Scripture condemns this practice as worthy of exclusion from the redeemed community; that nature, in the complementarity of male and female sex organs, unequivocally displays God’s intent for gender pairing; that arguments are drawn from experience, reason, and science (12).

[7] Although this is a very detailed study, the author’s methodology is consistent: the application of philological, textual, form, narrative and historical criticism; the use of comparative culture and religion; full discussion and appraisal of scholarly commentary of all types; he concludes with personal reflections. His controlling conviction is that the Bible finds same-sex relations an abomination, meriting the severest punishment or exclusion from the community of the redeemed.

[8] His first chapter covers the Old Testament. He briskly disposes of the ancient Near Eastern evidence, pointing to its incomplete nature and the fact that the Levitical laws called for the punishment of both active and passive participants by death, going beyond anything in ancient Near Eastern texts. The creation narratives in Genesis 1-3 provide the justification and authority for heterosexual intercourse as the divinely ordained and only valid expression of human sexuality and predicate all subsequent scriptural and ecclesiastical judgments on sex.

[9] At times he agrees with scholars like Nissinen, but opts for a different emphasis. In Genesis 9:20-27, both concur that the action of Ham was the homosexual rape of the drunken Noah. Ham’s anal penetration of his father brought a curse on his descendants, the Canaanites (71; Nissinen: 52-53). However, for Nissinen the narrative is not about Ham’s homosexual orientation or inclination, but his failed struggle for power, ensuring a tragic loss of status for himself and his descendants. Gagnon asserts that the narrator is expressing utter revulsion at this homosexual act and notes in contrast that the deed of Lot’s daughters in getting their father drunk and then initiating sex with him merely elicits mild editorial distaste. His personal comment is revealing, “certainly one can sympathize with the motives of the daughters of Lot: the desire for progeny” (70). His take on the Sodom story is similar. Since Bailey’s book, this narrative has been understood as less concerned with homosexuality than hospitality. Nissinen and Gagnon agree that *yada*, “to know,” denotes sexual intercourse, but the former concludes that power-driven sexual aggression towards strangers is the core of the narrative and it tells the reader nothing about attitudes towards homoeroticism (49). Gagnon, on the other hand, although he does not discount the presence of the violation of hospitality, avers that the text neither precludes xenophobic aggression nor homosexual desire, but the link between the behavior of the men of Sodom and homosexual activity is plain. However, the text is not ideal for the study of same-sex intercourse because of the presence of these other factors (77-78).³ Despite the enduring popularity of David and Jonathan as models of same sex love, Gagnon and Nissinen both downplay the homoerotic element in favor of the political. Nissinen does compare the intensely homosocial bonding of David and Jonathan with a modern “gay” relationship between equals and,

³ Bailey notes that John Calvin suggested that “to know” might have meant to discover the type of men that the foreigner Lot brought into Sodom, though this superficial request concealed their true homosexual intent (5 n. 1).

thus, leaves open the possibility of a sexual dimension (55). Gagnon discounts this and asserts that the relationship was “completely asexual” accusing Nissinen of “waffling” and “doublespeak” (154-55). It is important to him to reject any likelihood of sex since it cannot then be used to validate same-sex intercourse by the church.

[10] It is hard to find anything positive in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: the latter condemns both partners to death and, truth to tell, liberal commentators from Bailey to Nissinen have been forced to “waffle.” Bailey resolves that these cannot be “lightly dismissed” by the church but may require qualifications as scientific and theological advances continue - this in 1955 (156). Nissinen sets them in the context of anti-Canaanite religious polemic, post-exilic attempts to preserve a special Israelite identity, or the transgressing of commonly accepted gender roles, the passive partner being especially disgraced (44), but this does not explain 20:13. Gagnon makes the point that in the entire Holiness Code the only proscribed practice to which the word *to'eva*, “abomination,” is directly coupled is homosexual intercourse, as a “particularly revolting and conspicuous violation of boundaries established by God against the defiling behavior characteristic of other peoples” (113).⁴ He emphasizes the comprehensive nature of the condemnation and penalty and holds that the commands of God, not the consensus of surrounding culture, must control the behavior of God’s people, “reforming rather than conforming” (117). The matter is moved beyond idolatry, foreign taint, gender transgression, or impeding procreation by asserting that it violates the divinely-ordered complementarity of male and female. The Old Testament presents homosexual conduct as a wicked flouting of God’s design and connects it with adultery, bestiality, and incest and, thus, it can be rejected by both Paul and contemporary communities of faith that also abhor such activities. He calls the position “clear and unequivocal” (157). While other scholars would doubtless dispute this, the author’s reading of the “plain sense” of the text is not without merit and he does expose shortcomings in the liberal position. Indeed, liberal scholars acknowledge that the Hebrew Bible scarcely approves of homosexual conduct and try, like Nissinen, to mitigate its sting. From Gagnon’s perspective, as scholar and Christian, the evidence is incontrovertible and God’s command must be obeyed in the church without demur. But his own position is not without equivocation: the men of Sodom, supposedly homosexual, are burned, Lot’s daughters, guilty of incest, merit his sympathy.

[11] Gagnon explores the writings of Philo, Josephus, various pseudepigrapha, and Hellenistic authors in a concise second chapter to set the stage for his discussion of the New Testament. These help to clarify what Jesus and New Testament authors, other than Paul, might have thought about homosexuality. Further, they illuminate Paul’s understanding of *para physin*, “contrary to nature.” In these authors Gagnon discerns a rooted objection to homosexual

⁴ Gagnon, like countless others, buys into the fiction that Canaanite religion, an imprecise term, was wildly immoral and full of vile practices like homosexual intercourse. This was notably expressed by John Bright who depicted it as having “numerous debasing practices including sacred prostitution, homosexuality and various orgiastic rites” (118-19) - all this being said without a single shred of evidence. The divinities of Ugarit, the primary source for understanding Canaanite religion, were robustly heterosexual. Among other things the rulers of Ugarit were expected to, “banish those who plunder the child of the poor and feed the orphan” (KTU 1.16 vi 45) - presumably when not holding orgies or seducing pretty lads. “Canaanite religion” in the Hebrew Bible is “ancient Israelite religion,” one of the “Canaanite religions,” from which the proponents of Persian period and Hellenistic Judaism were at pains to distance themselves.

intercourse as lacking the ability to procreate, violating the anatomical matching of male and female sex organs, displaying excessive lust, and as a form of behavior rejected by the animal world (180-83). Therefore, they corroborate and advance what he has already detected in the Old Testament.

[12] Gagnon's study of the New Testament focuses on Jesus (chap. 3) and Paul and Deutero-Paul (chap. 4). Any attempt to establish what Jesus thought about homosexuality is risky since all commentators, Gagnon included, must argue *e silentio*. His contention is that Jesus' attitude to divorce was much harsher than that of his contemporaries; therefore he would "probably" (187) have been against same-sex relationships. Jesus' views on marriage and divorce were based solidly on Genesis 1:27 and 2:24; he did not abrogate the Mosaic Torah, in spite of his occasional idiosyncratic interpretations. According to Gagnon, the list of vices in Mark 7:21-23 rests on Leviticus 18 and 20. The liberal contention that Jesus' tolerance for women and social outcasts might have extended to homosexual acts is dismissed. Nissinen admits that nothing is known of Jesus' sexual life or his views on sexual ethics in general.⁵ He refers to Jesus' single state and his "special" relationship with the beloved disciple only to dismiss them as revealing nothing (118-22). However, the fact that Nissinen leaves matters open-ended prompts Gagnon to chide him for side-stepping the question of Jesus' opposition to same-sex intercourse (188, n. 2). Gagnon scolds liberals for assuming that acceptance need not involve repentance and reformation, but also ultra-conservatives for believing that the church must be a holy community apart from the world: liberals sacrifice righteousness, conservatives love (212-13). He does not discount a hermeneutic of love, but it is "tough love."

[13] Like the Old Testament, the verses that allude to same-sex relations in the New Testament are scanty. Romans 1:24-27 is the root text for church teaching on homosexuality: "It is left to Paul to provide clear instruction for the churches of his day, and ours on same-sex intercourse" (229). Gagnon's scholarly apparatus in this chapter is massive and centers on establishing Paul's opposition to any form of homosexual relations and refuting any scholarly attempts to limit his definition to exploitive relations, sex with slave-boys, or pederasty. He distinguishes five stages in Paul's argument: God's majesty is manifested in creation; humans reject this transcendent majesty for idols; God gives them over to their passions; some of these passions involve self-degrading and unnatural intercourse; this ends in death (252-53). Gagnon returns to his underlying theme that same-sex intercourse is *para physin*, "against nature," penis for vagina not mouth or anus. Nissinen had argued that "against nature" meant transgressing what is generally accepted or conventional. Thus, pederasty would not be against nature in classical Greek society for it was an accepted convention (105). For him, Paul's concept of creation (*ktisis*) was not taken from Genesis 1-3, but from Hellenistic-Jewish ideas of nature (*physis*). Therefore Paul was not addressing homosexuals, but "conventional" men and women who choose to engage in "unconventional" homosexual acts. Yet, as elsewhere, Nissinen qualifies his remark saying "presumably nothing would have made Paul approve homoerotic behavior" (112). This forces him back on his conclusion that Paul is using as a rhetorical device behavior that is reprehensible

⁵ Nissinen omits any reference to Jesus' rigorous attitude to marriage and divorce. Yet, as Gagnon suggests, if this reflects the historical Jesus then he might well have abhorred any same-sex relations.

to the true God and this is set in the context of his argument for justification by faith. The contemporary community of faith, accordingly, need not be bound by his comments on homosexual actions.

[14] Gagnon will have none of this and maintains that *ktisis* and *physis* are collapsed in Paul's thinking in Romans 1: "what is 'contrary to nature' is at one and the same time contrary to divinely created structures" (258-59 n.8). Homosexual intercourse is one of the vilest ways of perverting God's created order and he consigns its practitioners to the degrading consequences. Paul's "visceral" feelings about same-sex intercourse echo the level of disgust shown by the other Jewish writers that the author has examined - of course, as he admits, not all commentators agree with him. Also Gagnon dismisses the argument that the passage deals with justification by faith rather than homosexual conduct (279). Paul traces all human sin back to the fall, so the creation stories, with their mandated heterosexual intercourse, are the main source of his thesis (290).

[15] This chapter closes with a discussion of the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in the lists of vices in I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10. The roots of these are well enough attested in classical Greek, but their meaning here is disputed. He surveys the translations and commentators and determines that in 1 Corinthians 6:9 *malakoi* means passive partners in homosexual intercourse, especially those who try to make their appearance more feminine. *Arsenokoitai* merits a much more exhaustive discussion, since it is a neologism first attested in these verses. Nissinen notes that the word might mean a male who lies with anyone. Nonetheless, in the LXX of Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, *arsen* and *koite* are so close together that these verses likely prompted the neologism and so gave it a homoerotic connotation for those who made the connection, but the potential for ambiguity remains (114-17). Not for Gagnon for whom it denotes all forms of male same-sex intercourse and scholars like Nissinen, who leave the type of intercourse open, are disingenuous (325). He ends by observing that these two verses corroborate his understanding of Christian teaching that "all homosexual intercourse is excluded from faithful Christian living" (336).

[16] The last and longest chapter, "The Hermeneutical Relevance of the Biblical Witness," investigates and dismisses the arguments that Scripture condemns only pederastic and exploitive homosexual conduct, that it censures homosexuality because it threatens male dominance, or that the Bible did not understand the category "homosexual" as exclusive same-sex orientation.⁶ He then moves beyond the ancient texts to dispose of some contemporary explanations of homosexuality that the authors of the Bible could not have known. He analyzes the literature on the "genetic" explanation and finds the arguments unconvincing and turns to cultural and environmental reasons. "Weak masculine identity" opens the way to homosexual orientation (410-11). Statistics show that societies favoring homosexual conduct have more homosexuals (413-16). This alarming fact clearly drives Gagnon's to move his agenda beyond the academy and the church to prevent the expansion of homosexuality in society. He lists some faith-ministries that attempt to change homosexuals, most of these securely in the conservative camp. "Scripture

⁶ Gagnon argues that there is some evidence to suggest that the Hellenistic world, and hence Paul, were aware of homosexual relationships between men that were not exploitive. But since these also contradicted the basic divine order of creation they were included Paul's condemnation (350-61).

presents only two choices for obtaining sexual intercourse: become involved in a lifelong monogamous heterosexual relationship or remain celibate” (432). That there are precious few Biblical texts on homosexuality does not daunt him, for Scripture reflects the plan of God’s created heterosexual order. He discounts the comparison with the church’s rejection of slavery and does not accept the equation of the early church’s admission of Gentiles (a state of being) to admitting homosexuals (a proscribed behavior) today.

[17] A brief conclusion recaps his main themes. An increase in disease, including HIV/AIDS, an increase in pedophilia and adult adolescent same-sex activity, the cheapening of marriage and the family, bizarre manifestations of human sexuality, the marginalization of people who publicly oppose homosexual behavior - all these demonstrate the wisdom of God in sanctioning only heterosexual unions (488-89). They are reasons enough for the church to influence public policy and work against making sexual orientation a “*specially* protected class” (491).

[18] One narrative is an impressively learned study driving home the point that those few Biblical texts and authors that allude to or mention homosexuality condemn it. Gagnon plausibly urges the plain sense of the text. It is noteworthy that liberal commentators, Nissinen included, do not necessarily disagree, but seek to lessen the harshness by providing a hermeneutical way out. On balance, Gagnon is probably right, the Bible does not approve of male same-sex relations of any kind. But what does this signify? For the scholar or interested reader not motivated by religion or beholden to its institutional manifestations, this is an extraordinarily useful repository of information and sources. However, the book is clearly aimed at an audience drawn from seminary, divinity school, and church for whom the Bible is authoritative scripture.⁷ They are secured by the meta-narrative that deals with the religious reasons for writing the book and the meaning of his theological and ethical conclusions for church and society.⁸

[19] As observed earlier, this meta-narrative is informed by Gagnon’s belief that the Bible expresses God’s absolute rejection of all non-heterosexual intercourse as an abomination, slighting his transcendent majesty and flouting his divine will. His distaste for homosexuality is omnipresent. He cites statistics that depict gays as unfaithful, unstable, promiscuous, predatory, and a danger to the youth and health of the community. He reluctantly admits that some homosexuals may not fall into this category, but even a lifelong, monogamous, and loving homosexual relationship, if expressed sexually, defies God’s will. Again, there is a certain plain sense in what he says: years of oppression and repression perhaps catapulted parts of the gay community to excess - witness the existence of venues like the “Mineshaft” and the “Anvil” in New York City, and these, like HIV/AIDS, made headlines. Gagnon’s ideal society is one that neither prosecutes nor promotes homosexual behavior, but works to minimize it.

[20] One further observation: as an exacting scholar, who accepts the higher criticism with all its implications, who does not regard all the commands and precepts of the Bible as equally binding, he is clearly uneasy about his implacable strictures on homosexuality being assailed. He remarks

⁷ Gagnon pays tribute to the house-church group that “prayed me through the process of writing this book” (12).

⁸ He is driven by a fear that the “window of opportunity for speaking out against homosexual behavior is closing” (35).

that the Gospels are “portraits of Jesus pieced together to serve particular theological ends” and “Paul is still ‘my apostle’ but he does not (and did not in the first-century) have to be inerrant in every matter”(345), but Gagnon believes that he is on same-sex relations. The question for the reader must remain: if the teaching of the Bible on a whole variety of things has been adapted or rejected over the centuries, why should its references to same-sex relations, minimal and not entirely unambiguous, not be treated the same way. Gagnon argues that God’s created heterosexual order makes this impossible. He has undoubtedly galvanized the debate: the book will be welcomed and hated, praised and blamed, but it should be read. Finally, in the context of such a valuable contribution to the issue, two glaring and profoundly irritating lacks are an index of subjects and a bibliography.

Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible: Stone (ed.)

[21] With this book one enters a world of scholarship that is poles apart from Gagnon. Here the reader enters the fragmented intellectual landscape of postmodern approaches to the Bible. Biblical scholarship, always a methodological laggard, came late to postmodernism and some of its proponents have been distinguished by an uncritical, not to say naive acceptance of it. In a 1998 publication, R. P. Carroll could say that postmodernism in the Bible was “in its infancy.” He was particularly critical of the authors of *The Postmodern Bible* (1995) as slavishly reproducing the insights of Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Bal *et al.* without genuinely understanding them: “ten white privileged academics denouncing white academism!” (57-58). Of course, Carroll favored postmodern readings of the Bible, including rhetorical, psychoanalytical (Lacan), feminist and womanist, but he required their intellectual credibility. However, neither *The Postmodern Bible*, Carroll in his article, nor *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* as a whole mentions a “queer” reading. Thus, it might be said that queer reading of the Bible is “neo-natal” and this volume, though it confines itself to the Hebrew Bible, is thus on the cutting edge and its credibility will be tested.

[22] The book comprises an introduction by the editor, seven essays and three responses. In his introduction Ken Stone sets out the motivations for a queer reading of the Hebrew Bible. The basic one is that queer theory might have implications for Biblical interpretation, though this is a “future possibility rather than a present reality,” for only in the last three years have there been calls for gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in relation to the Bible (11-12). This collection is a first response to that. He defines a “queer reading” as one that communicates lesbian, gay, or bisexual experiences, identities, and social locations in influencing questions asked of the Bible and the answers that are given (19). Several of the essays in this collection question the binary categorization of homosexual and heterosexual and there is no one exclusive queer reading, since the readings depend on the perspective of the authors. It is, in fact, a “matrix of methodologies” (32).

[23] In “YHWH as Erastes,” T. W. Jennings explores the relationship between YHWH and David: one that he locates in the Greek mode with the divine as *erastes*, active lover, and David as the “beloved,” *eromenos*.⁹ He believes that from Bailey’s work on that the reading strategy

⁹ I follow the transcription of the Israelite god’s name that each author employs.

applied to the relevant texts in the Bible has either been defensive or trying to find positive same-sex relationships in the text, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi.¹⁰ These do not go far enough. For Jennings, a queer reading subsumes all kinds of sexualities including pederastic and sado-masochistic, which may find hidden dynamics in the text as well as providing illumination (37). The remainder of the essay elaborates his basic thesis. He argues that the narrative probes the homoerotic relationship between YHWH and David, further narrowing the *erastes/eromenos* relationship to that of warrior chief and boy companion. As boy companion, David was the lover of Saul, Jonathan and YHWH. His arguments for the existence of homoerotic “knight/squire” relationships in this narrative are weak; at best he says that a homoerotic reading cannot be precluded - once again, that risky argument *e silentio*, fortified by “likely” and “probable” (42). YHWH chooses good-looking lads, Saul and David.¹¹ Jennings understands David’s dancing in front of the ark (2 Samuel 6:14) to be an erotic display for his divine lover who will wed him. The ephod is conceived as a “g-string or jockstrap” (57) made of precious metal, a fetish for the divine phallus, the ark. This symbolizes YHWH’s potency as he “bursts forth” against the enemies of David or fertilizes the land. David’s attempt to build YHWH a house is overturned by YHWH who wishes to remain a warrior chief, but he will build David a house to signify their union. YHWH has no social life among the gods nor female companion and selects the good-looking David, “Israel,” with whom YHWH has a homoerotic relationship in which David is always the “bottom” and YHWH the “top.” It is an original viewpoint, enthusiastically argued, but depends on quirky readings of the text that simply do not hold up under close scrutiny. Each reader must decide if it brings a new (scholarly) level of understanding to this story. That is the treacherous allure of the postmodern.

[24] The next essay moves further into the realm of the high fantastic and the high camp in “Yahweh as Top: A Lost Targum,” by R. Boer. The setting for this psychoanalytic symposium is a tea-party on Mount Sinai. The participants are Yahweh, Moses, Gilles Deleuze, Freud, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Jacques Lacan. There is a great deal of rich, not to say lurid imagery. Yahweh is depicted as a slight, handsome man with earrings and a pony-tail, wearing make-up; Moses a robust older gentleman, a bear, who is attracted to the potential of Yahweh’s pert, upright butt (78). It seems as if this whole essay is designed to *épater les bourgeois*, or titillate the in-crowd. Frankly, the gay, sexual descriptions are tediously conventional and weary rather than shock. In response to an essay of S. D. Moore on queering Paul, Boer says that he wishes to submit himself physically to Moore as a bottom (80 n. 1). He also introduces the “F” word - this may be a dubious first in a scholarly work. The essay explores sado-masochistic theories of the participants and how they appear in the Hebrew Bible, though it is hard to trace these amidst all the high camp. It can be compared to an S/M leather club’s float in a gay pride

¹⁰ Gagnon never mentions the Book of Ruth and Ruth and Naomi.

¹¹ He goes on to say that the exceptions to this are Absalom and Adonijah, whom YHWH chooses for their self-advertized beauty, but then rejects because of his loyalty to David, although he has passed his pretty prime. Even if Jennings’ dubious thesis can be sustained, Absalom and Adonijah are not selected - they are conscious of and try to trade on their good looks. Perhaps a better way of understanding this is to see an authorial or editorial presentation of YHWH finally making good on the assertion that he “does not look on the outward appearance,” but “on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7b). From Solomon loyalty not looks will mark the good monarch.

parade, planned by gay freshmen psychology students, built by drag queens and “manned” by leathermen. Even Jesus finds his way into this Hebrew Bible as a masochist in Golgotha, a den of bondage and domination (101-2). At one point the debate descends into an S/M homosexual orgy and the essay ends with a glimpse of Yahweh’s ass that leaves their faces shining (105). It is difficult to offer any serious comment, though, as will be noted, one of the respondents is highly laudatory. In the manner of unrestrained postmodern writing, it tells us a little about the topic, less about the Hebrew Bible, but a great deal about the author.

[25] S/M and violence re-appear in the next paper by L. Rowlett, “Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah.” Reading this narrative through a queer lens, Rowlett argues, reveals Yahweh as an exotic Other who teases Samson, “a butch bottom,” through Delilah, the femme dominatrix. The gender roles of Samson and Delilah in literary and musical history are investigated using the gender category theories of Judith Butler. A dominatrix and bottom emerge, but of indeterminate gender or gender impersonation. Rowlett clearly feels that she is in the *avant garde* with her suggestion that an opera of Samson and Delilah might be performed by an all-female cast with Samson as a contralto role, or with an all-male cast, like the 1999 all-male ballet, “Swan Lake.”¹² Aspects of S/M play are then traced through the story, first with Delilah as dominatrix, then the Philistines and Yahweh. Finally S/M is discerned in the theological patterns of the Deuteronomist Historian (DH) in Judges where Yahweh alternates between being a “top” and a “bottom” and toying with the Israelites, like the classic S/M “Daddy” who keeps his “boys/slaves” on edge, something that Yahweh, he or she, enjoys (112-15). In two more conventional paragraphs, the author argues that the rhetorical cycle of violence in Judges was employed by the DH to counteract situations in which religious decentralization and diversity threatened the monotheism essential to centralized authority, either in the reign of Josiah or the Second Temple period. Surely this can be established without a queer reading. Further, the queer reason for the cycle, that Yahweh or the DH derive a sadistic pleasure from permitting the cycle of violence to continue, is not so pure speculation.

[26] Stone’s essay on Hosea, “Lovers and Raisin Cakes: Food, Sex and Divine Insecurity in Hosea,” is a reasoned discussion of the role of Yhwh as provider for his people. It uses anthropological and gender studies, queer theory, and pays closer attention to the text than most of the essays. His thesis calls into question the notion that men have an uncomplicated approach to food and sex, as opposed to women, and that Hosea’s concepts of manhood are more coherent than the biblical notions of women, critiqued by feminist scholars. Unlike Gagnon, Stone is not deceived by the fictional wicked Canaanite religion (121-22). However, fertility is an inescapable element in Hosea’s religion and there is a contest between the two gods, Yhwh and Baal, as to who is the best provider for his people. In anthropological terms a man demonstrated his manhood by providing food and controlling sexual access to the women of his household (128). As the paternity of Hosea’s children was in doubt and he had to reassert his control over Gomer, so Yhwh has to demonstrate his ability to feed his people and defend his honor against Baal.

¹² Alas, not so *avant garde* or original as she thinks: since the nineteenth century in traditional British fairy-tale pantomimes, the male lead, the “principal boy,” is played by a woman, with very good legs, and the comic female roles by male comedians. All-male and all-female casts were/are commonplace at single-sex schools.

Traditional societies emphasize the primary role of men in creating and contributing to the substance of life. When the Israelites praise Baal as the giver of fertility, they call Yhwh's "manhood" into question, as Gomer's infidelities cuckolded Hosea. Hosea's rhetoric on food and sex reveals a god anxious about his ability to be a "good male god" (136). Like Rowlett in the previous essay, Stone uses Butler's idea that gender norms are fluid: like Hosea, Yhwh's masculinity cannot be sustained, hence his divine anxiety revealed. Queer readings work by destabilizing Biblical texts and a queer reading does that for the book of Hosea and for Yhwh.

[27] However, it is not obvious what difference Stone's queer reading makes. The feminist/womanist critiques that he cites, along with Butler's reading of gender categories have already challenged the patriarchy and patriarchal readings of Hosea. Stone applies queer theory, but does not convincingly demonstrate how this advances the understanding of the book. To question the masculinity of a man who cannot provide food and control sexual access to his wife hardly counts as a "queer" reading. Yhwh is anything but uncertain about his ability to provide, it is Israel that cannot see the obvious. Baal is already out of the game - Yhwh through Elijah had seen to that on Mount Carmel. Certainly Yhwh shows a surprisingly gentle and occasionally tentative side in Hosea and elsewhere, but the hermeneutical community hardly needs a queer reading to remind it of that.

[28] In "The Gift of Voice, the Gift of Tears: A Queer Reading of Lamentations in the Context of AIDS," M. West suggests the voices of remembrance, mourning, and resistance along with the gift of tears in Lamentations allow the gay community to read the book as it works through the devastation of AIDS. She points out that in 1:8-10, the nakedness and uncleanness of the devastated Jerusalem are a metaphor for AIDS-related illnesses. But Jerusalem also requires that God notice the extremity of her sufferings and questions whether such suffering is acceptable. West contends that a queer reading of Lamentations should militate against the book being used to perpetuate the idea that AIDS is God's punishment for homosexual behavior.¹³ She refers to the book of Job which shares the language of lament and angrily questions God's even-handedness. The tears shed by the city are a gift, like the tears of the AIDS community. Although Lamentations is an example of the city-lament genre, its language has expressed and sustained various expressions of profound grief over the centuries. West's is a tender piece, a type not often found in scholarly works. It might be gently suggested that perhaps it does not need a queer reading to question retribution theology - Job had already done that - nor to apply Lamentations to human tragedy, straight or gay.

[29] Two rabbinic midrashim provide the background for the paper by M. Carden, "Remembering Pelotit: A Queer Midrash on Calling Down Fire." Jewish tradition asked and answered the question why God had taken notice of Sodom in the first place. Carden refers to a version of a tale of a maiden of Sodom, named Paltit/Pelotit, who was sentenced to death by burning for giving food to a beggar. As she was led to the fire, she called out, "Sovereign of all the worlds! Maintain my right and my cause (at the hands of the men) of Sodom" (156; the text is the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*), hence God's interest. Accepting the idea that there is no Sodom only

¹³ Gagnon, following Paul, would doubtless argue that AIDS is one of the consequences of God giving people up to their degrading passions.

stories about Sodom, he sets out to “detoxify its homophobic application” (152) by addressing other moral issues in the story. He engages with the homophobic tradition through two texts: an anonymous mediaeval poem that links homophobic wrath and heterosexual pleasure in paradise and an evangelical cartoon called “Doom Town” in which the children of Sodom are snuffed out because they are tainted by the wicked. Carden, whose revelations about his personal life place him poles apart from Gagnon, nevertheless argues that for gay men the primary focus of the story must be homosexuality. For him the story is one of homophobic violence viewed from the perspective of Lot’s guests (155). Presumably this is what he wishes to detoxify by shifting the focus to the maiden daughter and wife.

[30] What about the perspective of the rebellious daughter of Sodom? Carden argues for the presence of rebellious lesbians in Sodom. “Being a poofster myself, I think I’m justified in imagining a fraternity of fairies standing beside their dyke sisters” (157). Jewish tradition makes Pelotit another daughter of Lot, so Carden pictures Lot sitting in judgment over his rebellious child. The men of Sodom in Rabbinic tradition condemn their daughters “because they are queer,” according to the author. Of course, rabbinic tradition actually says nothing of the kind. Following Irenaeus, he treats Lot’s wife, Edith, as a sympathetic figure who looks back on Sodom and is punished by God for her sympathy. A postscript connects the condemnation of the Sodomites to opposition to changes in the law of the Australian state of Queensland to ban discrimination against same-sex couples.

[31] This paper has undoubted scholarly aspirations: primary texts and a variety of secondary sources are cited on the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic texts, and gender and queer theory. But the Sodom story’s only task is to serve as a jumping-off point for a stream of consciousness that creates a reading that is a novelty.

[32] T. Koch is up-front and refreshing about his reasons for applying queer theory to the Hebrew Bible in “Cruising as Methodology: Homoeroticism and the Scriptures,” the last of the seven papers. He resents authority being located outside the sphere that he lives in. He attacks three varieties of hermeneutic that dictate how gays should react to the Bible. The first is “The Pissing Contest” in which conservatives and liberals wrangle back and forth and the ultimate winner will dictate gay behavior. Thus the intensity of the debate is explained by the prize - power over gay Christian lives. The review of Gagnon’s book above, made this absolutely clear. Should Gagnon’s side win, there is an agenda. Even liberals like Helminiak want the same thing. Gagnon, however, is more aggressive about influencing society beyond the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The second hermeneutic is “Jesus is my Trump Card.” Uncomfortable with “The Pissing Contest,” some scholars try to collapse the debate by the trump card, “Jesus is Love,” so we can all get along. But even this group are, according to Koch who cites John Shelby Spong as emblematic of this approach, prone to defining the kind of relationships that gays should have if they are Christian. In Spong’s case one-on-one commitment (173). The last hermeneutic, “I Can Fit the Glass Slipper, Too!” looks for sympathetic characters in Scripture to show gays and lesbians that they belong. Koch notes that Cinderella’s stepsisters have to cut off heels and toes to fit the slipper and the biblical characters, such as eunuchs, that might serve as sympathetic characters are hardly appealing to gay men (174). The author wants his own homoerotic power to enlighten and inform his reading, thinking and believing.

[33] Frankly, this is the best argument made in the entire book for a queer reading of the Hebrew Bible. He then turns to the gay practice of cruising in which gay men, keeping their wits about them, try to meet suitable partners in a variety of locations. Not all gay men do this, but a large majority does. For many it is exciting and energizing and Koch wishes to apply his “cruising” methodology, his gay erotic knowledge, to the Hebrew Scriptures. He chooses four incidents, “scores” (the term for a successful meeting that usually ends in sex). He likens Elijah in 2 Kings 2:2-8) to a leather-clad “bear,” a mature, solid hairy man, literally “a lord of goat-skin/hair” (v. 8). From this Koch leaps to the notion of Elijah as a goat god. The curious tale of the boys who call Elisha “baldy” and are cursed by the prophet and eaten by two bears (2 Kings 2:23-25), is interpreted as queer-baiting. The baldness is Elisha’s mourning for his deceased master Elijah, taken by the boys as a homosexual relationship, and Koch’s moral is don’t bait queers they may strike back. When Jehu returns from slaughtering the kinsmen of Ahaziah of Judah, he meets Jehonadab ben Rechab, asks for his loyalty, and takes his hand (2 Kings 10:12-17). They hold hands and ride off together, a successful cruise and pick-up. Finally, Ehud’s eighteen inch sword in Judges 3:12-26 is taken as a metaphor for Ehud’s massive phallus, because he draws it out with his left hand, the one used to holding the penis for urinating. The fat king of Moab, understood as sexually interested, takes no action for he thinks Ehud is removing his penis. Even Stone is a little uneasy about these staccato interpretations (19). Perhaps in queer reading anything is possible, but it certainly strains credibility and a rather well argued reason for a queer reading is immediately torpedoed by sheer fantasy.

[34] There are three responses. The first, by Tat-siong Benny Liew, while applauding the new insights that queer theory might bring to the work of biblical studies, acknowledges that the authors frequently transgress accepted norms of scholarship: coming out of the closet, discussing taboo subjects to name but two. He offers some shrewd observations. In Boer’s “psychoanalytic” essay, he detects Moses as the traditional biblical scholar who really does not follow all the discussion. In this representation Boer shows as loathing other scholars who do not understand his queer psychoanalytic realm, but yet, himself formed in traditional biblical scholarship, he resents these outsiders creeping in with their theories. It was observed in the review of Boer’s piece above that it really centers on the author. Liew, like Carroll, affirms that the literary and cultural theories propounded by the postmoderns must not be accepted uncritically by biblical scholars. Boer, Stone, Rowlett and Carden are taken to task for raising but not thoroughly exploring questions of race and ethnicity that relate to sexual behavior. Lesbian and gay studies have made sex and sexuality the center. If queer theory does the same in studying the Bible, its effects will be limiting. Queer readings should be multifocal (188). He makes the telling point that queer racial minorities are conspicuous by their absence in this volume (189). This hearkens back to Carroll’s comment about “white privileged academicians denouncing white academism.” Nor are there contributions from queer theorists from outside the biblical world. He is also wary of a descent into unregulated reader-centered interpretations. Although sympathetic to the enterprise, Liew certainly exposes its weaknesses.

[35] D. T. Spencer, who responds as a “gay, male ethicist,” relates the collection to his own work, in particular to his “liberationist” approach which sees “the dominant expressions of church and society as oppressive and therefore in need of radical transformation” (196). The

queer readings in this collection approximate most closely to this. He then evaluates certain of the essays to assess the contribution of a queer reading to a liberationist approach. He regards Koch's essay as a valuable contribution, though he is uneasy with Koch's individualistic and personal approach, "devoid of political and historical contest and meaning" (199). He applauds Stone's use of other readings than queer (feminist reading), for the queer community must be accountable to other marginalized groups. Rowlett's essay on Samson and Delilah is praised for its destabilizing of traditional interpretations of the text as well as the divine and social power relations that are present in the story. He reserves his highest praise for Boer and Jennings.

[36] The theological aspects of queer readings are the context in which L. C. Schneider reads the collection. She asks, "How can we not read the Scriptures now and not encounter their many and tantalizing traces of homoeroticism and queer possibility?" (211). She believes that a queer reading does not simply reveal sexual diversity in the world of the Bible - that alone would not challenge the dominant patriarchy and heterosexuality. These "exegetes" raise the notion of a more queer divinity and this is a theological and ethical challenge to the reading of heteronormativity in the Bible. This permits the repressed sexuality of the divine to emerge in the essays of Boer and Jennings. She enthuses over Boer's presentation of Yhwh's instructions for the tabernacle to Moses as those of an anal-retentive, fruity, late twentieth-century interior decorator (216). In the midst of her enthusing, she pauses to note that most of the essays confine themselves to male sexuality that might suggest a misogynistic strain in divine-human relationships, thus excluding women and queer women. She severely criticizes the essays of Jennings, Boer, and even Stone in this regard, although the latter has tipped his hat to feminist readings. Is there another "pissing context" on the way, of a very different from the kind that Koch imagined? A final note explores the kind of revelation that a queer reading might discover.

[37] Ten academicians have contributed to this book: five are openly gay, four, two essayists and two respondents, are from the same seminary, three are women and, since in an overwhelmingly "tell all" collection none assert racial minority, it might be assumed that they are all white. This is truly an "in house" production that verges on the exclusive, not to say incestuous. As already observed, even in those instances where a queer reading actually engages with the text (Stone's essay), there is little evidence that anything startlingly original is produced, beyond a slightly more nuanced reading. In other cases, such as Koch's essay, a construction is imposed on the text that is highly individualistic, not to say self-centered. Jehu and Jehonadab ben Rechab form a political alliance. To suggest a gay "pick-up" may cause excited vibrations in the community of gay biblical scholars and their sympathizers, but by no means all of them. For postmodern scholarship to be coherent and credible it must authentically present the methodologies and insights that have evolved and carefully apply them. By Carroll's standards and Liew's critique, this collection does not effectively present a credible application of queer theory, but one that is narrow and exclusive. In most cases there is no serious struggle with the text and few reasonable justifications for the claims that are made. However, if this is what postmodern queer theory is supposed to do, the book is a lively and provocative enough read, but its audience is surely limited. Beyond the world of biblical scholarship, there is already a move away from the wholly negative effects of unrestrained deconstructionism and the excesses of postmodernism. This has

been named “neopragmatism” (Beardslee: 231-32). So the cutting edge of queer theory may turn out to be no more than the cow’s (bull’s) tail.

Conclusion

[38] Scholars such as Gagnon and Stone and his ilk are poles apart in some ways, yet surprisingly close in others. Their attitudes to homosexuality, their treatment of the Biblical text, their interpretations and conclusions are very different. In scholarly terms, Gagnon’s book appears the more honest and rigorous, grappling with the Biblical text and presenting careful arguments for positions adopted, while the others trip the light fantastic stopping here and there to elicit or impose an “original” interpretation. However, they share characteristics that are peculiarly contemporary. The authors share a great deal of their personal lives as they impact their scholarship. They write, in the main, from within the Christian scholarly community and expect that to be their audience: academics for academicians. They believe, though for different reasons, that this is an issue that is incredibly important, though the number of texts that refer to “homosexuality” in the Bible is a tiny one. Gagnon circumvents this by invoking an entire created order to banish homosexual expression, the others by bringing a very narrow perspective to selected stories and bringing them into the community of queer readers.

[39] One significant observation remains: both these books, despite their differences, are situated securely in the post-Enlightenment, western intellectual and cultural tradition, even in its extremes of poststructuralism and postmodernism. They are expressions of what has been called the teleology of western society that is Eurocentric and regards western civilization as the culmination of all human progress. They proceed from an openly expressed, egalitarian homosexuality that is modern and western (see Murray and Roscoe: 4-5). In the sixteen-page bibliography to *Queer Commentary* there are only two works that refer to non-western cultural expressions of and accommodations to homosexuality: Asians in the USA and Amazonian tribes. Their focus is the Christian and mainly Protestant tradition and they ignore other major cultural traditions that have dealt with homosexuality fairly successfully and may well offer more authentic readings of the Bible. In that lies their arrogance and limitation.

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