

## **"Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with "New Eyes"**

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### **Reading the Bible with "New Eyes"**

Most modern gay men and lesbians are either afraid of the Bible or unfamiliar with its content, thinking that the Bible has only bad news for them. While it is true that the Bible was written in the context of patriarchal, heterosexist cultures, the message and story of God's unconditional love in Christ can be the "power of salvation" for gays and lesbians as well as for heterosexuals.

A bold, proactive reading of the Bible offers new life for lesbians, gay men, and their families and friends. Consensus is growing among respected scholars of Scripture that the Bible does not condemn such relationships. Contemporary gay and lesbian Christians have focused on proving that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. It is time to move beyond defending this position. It is not enough for the Bible simply not to condemn homosexuality. Gays and lesbians must be able to say, "Yes, it is..."Our Story, Too!"

### **Opening Doors of Ancient "closets"...**

Liberation theology and feminist biblical critique have shown that the Bible, in order to empower all people, must be read with new eyes from the vantage point of oppressed peoples. When we read the Biblical stories through today's experience, they come alive with new relevance. What if we just assume that lesbian and gay people were always in the Bible? Their historical counterparts followed Moses and Miriam in the Exodus, and walked with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee! Lesbians and gay men are everywhere, and always have been, even when silent and closeted about their sexuality.

It is time to boldly liberate some Biblical gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters and stories from ancient "closets". Centuries of silence in Biblical commentaries and reference books must now be broken by a passionate search for Biblical truth about sexuality.

Does the Bible include references, to, or stories about, gays and lesbians consistent with what historians and anthropologists know about sexuality during Biblical times? The answer is, "Yes!". Some stories are incontrovertible. Others are compellingly gay and lesbian. And, there are other stories curiously suggestive of same-sex relationships. All of these can empower lesbians and gay men to joyfully embrace the Bible.

### **A Lesbian and Gay "Nation"**

The book of Acts is an account of the early Church as it attempts to preach and live an "unhindered gospel" (Acts 28:31). Today, there is a great, global awakening of gay and lesbian communities, who still need access to an "unhindered gospel." Two crucial stories are central to such a gospel: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) and Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). Both have their roots in the prophecies of Isaiah 56. Isaiah proclaims a future day when Gentiles and eunuchs will be included among the people of God, and their sacrifices will be "*acceptable*." The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "*acceptable*" in Isaiah 56:7 also appears in Acts 10:35.

In the story of Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (a Gentile), Peter is given a divine revelation from God: ". . . God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God." (Acts 10:34-35). The word "nation" is actually the Greek word *ethnos* from which we derive our word "*ethnic*." The term refers to a race, culture or people. Thus Peter learns that among every race, culture or people those who fear God and do what is right are eligible for baptism. Is the gay and lesbian community just a political lobby for homosexual behavior, or is it an *ethnos*? Certainly, there are heterosexual people who engage in homosexual sex, and gay and lesbian people who may never have sex at all. Are gay and lesbian people a kind of behavior, or a kind of people for whom homoerotic attraction is one characteristic? An *ethnos* could be defined by a common history, vocabulary, culture, institutions (schools, libraries, clubs, churches, synagogues, social organizations, businesses) heroes, political leaders, scholars, values, and the ability to recognize each other even when submerged in the dominant culture. If these constitute an *ethnos*, gay and lesbian people are included in the word "*nation*" used in Acts 10. What evidence of gay and lesbian *ethnos* exists in the Bible? This is a complex detective story made more difficult by thousands of years of heterosexist bias in secular history and Biblical scholarship.

### God Blesses the "Barren Ones"

One place to begin is with the Biblical concepts of immortality. The Hebrew scriptures are not very clear about any consistent concept of life after death. The primary way that one would achieve immortality was through one's heirs. The worst fate that could befall someone was to be "cut off" from one's people. This could happen by being exiled for certain crimes, by public execution, or by dying without leaving any children. Prosperity and having many children were viewed as dual signs of God's favor. (Psalm 127:3-5; 128:3-6).

In this context, female barrenness was considered a curse. A woman's worth was connected to her ability to give her husband children. The Bible is full of stories of women who desperately prayed to God to "open their wombs" (Psalm 113:9; Genesis 30:1; I Samuel 1:10). Barrenness became a metaphor used by the prophets to describe Israel's pitiful condition when they felt abandoned or cursed by God. Isaiah 54 begins with a poignant recasting of this metaphor. Isaiah's prophetic message then revokes the curse of barrenness and Israel becomes a barren woman with many children. Two chapters later, Isaiah uses the term "dry tree" (a female image of barrenness) for eunuchs. It also associated the term "*cut off*" with eunuchs. The term "*eunuch*" in Isaiah 56 is possibly a generic term used to include men and women who do not have children.

The main reference in the law which may be the source of exclusion of eunuchs from the temple is Deuteronomy 23:1. Leviticus 21:17 says only those who are "unblemished can present themselves before God . . . ." This also excludes *eunuchs* who in ancient pagan religions were temple priests, and perhaps excludes children born of incestuous unions. Ultimately, Isaiah proclaims an inclusive covenant which promises the eunuchs and barren women *full participation* in the blessings of God and a "*name better than sons and daughters. . . an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.*"

Who were the eunuchs of Biblical times? The word, "eunuch" , seems to refer to a male who has been castrated (often to render him "*safe*" for female royalty). However, there are references to eunuchs as court officials who were not necessarily physical eunuchs.

Eunuchs referred to in Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel, as well as the New Testament, were not all castrated males. "Eunuch" is a more generic word that may well have included barren females, gay foreign court officials and magicians and priests, as well as castrated males. Castrated males were often functionally, if not constitutionally, homosexual.

### Marriage is not for everyone!

Jesus speaks about three kinds of eunuchs: "For there are eunuchs who have been so by birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can." (Matthew 19:12)

One might assume that eunuchs "made so by others" are those who have been castrated. Those who "*made themselves eunuchs*" are voluntary celibates. What of those, however, who were *born* eunuchs? Jesus makes it clear that heterosexual marriage is *not the norm* for everyone. This important comment by Jesus, which acknowledges lifestyles other than heterosexual marriage, applies to gays and lesbians. Two stories of black eunuchs, both royal court officials, exemplify God's redemptive action. In Jeremiah 38, an Ethiopian eunuch saves the life of Jeremiah, an unmarried prophet. Jeremiah, in turn, brings a message of God to the king which describes how Jerusalem can be saved.

Another Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8, is baptized by the apostle Philip. The eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53 (awfully close to Isaiah 54 and 56!) a passage of messianic prophecy which describes the destiny of the Suffering Servant who would be "*cut off*" from the land of the living. The eunuch got the message that those who have been "*cut off*" are to be included. Hence his question, "*What is to prevent me from being baptized?*" Philip the apostle answers, "**Nothing!**"

### Jesus Chooses a new "family"

Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of Isaiah 53, was "cut off" from his people in two ways: he was executed as a criminal and died without heirs. He was a functional, if not physical, eunuch. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ redefined eternal life, dissociating it from the necessity to produce children.

Once, when confronted by his biological mother and brothers, Jesus pointed to his disciples as a new family, saying: "For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31)

### Jesus Lived an Alternate Lifestyle

Relationships of Jesus in the gospels differ greatly from the contemporary so-called nuclear family. Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha. What drew Jesus to this very non-traditional family group of a bachelor brother living with two spinster sisters? Two barren women and a eunuch are Jesus' adult family of choice. Are we to assume they were all celibate heterosexuals? What if Mary and Martha were not sisters but called each other "sister" as did most lesbian couples throughout recorded history?

John's gospel refers no less than eight times to the "one whom Jesus loved", also called the "*beloved disciple*". Scholars rarely explore that fact that Jesus obviously had a

particularly close friendship with one man. Whether or not Jesus was gay, homophobia has silenced exploration of this relationship.

The Bible, in fact, knows almost nothing of the Post-Reformation ideal of monogamous, lifetime romantic heterosexual marriage. The Bible portrays marriage in terms of property and business transactions, polygamy, extended family, tribal groupings, Levirate marriage and other lifestyles. The anti-marriage bias in the New Testament and sex-negative emphasis of early theologians is well known by historians and students of human sexuality.

The new Christian community in Acts includes childless widows, former prostitutes, social outcasts, celibates, married people, eunuchs, blacks, Jews, and Gentiles. Those previously excluded were now fulfilling the promise of Isaiah 56: *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all the people."*

### "Same-Sex" Relationships in the Bible:

The stories of two prominent same-sex couples in the Scriptures provide gay men and lesbians with Biblical models of committed love in stressful circumstances.

#### Ruth and Naomi

The Book of Ruth is a romantic novel but not about romance between Ruth and Boaz. Naomi is actually the central character, and Ruth is the "redeemer/hero." Boaz' relationship with Ruth, far from being romantic, is a matter of family duty and property. This story contains the most moving promise of relational fidelity between two persons in all of the bible: "And Ruth said, 'Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whether thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God'". (Ruth 1:16) Although used in heterosexual marriage ceremonies for years, this is a vow between two women! When their husbands die in battle, Ruth makes this vow to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Ruth marries Boaz, a close relative, and redeems Naomi's place in her own family, also bearing a child for Naomi. Did Ruth and Naomi have a lesbian relationship? There's no way to know, but it is clear the two women had a lifelong, passionate, committed relationship celebrated in Scripture.

#### United in a Covenant of Love...David and Jonathan

Another story, that of David and Jonathan, occurs in a time when male warrior/lovers were common and considered noble.

This tragic triangle of passion, jealousy and political intrigue between Saul, Jonathan and David, leads to one of the most direct expressions of same-sex love in the Bible: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women." (II Samuel 1:26)

The author is clearly attuned to David's classic male beauty (I Samuel 16:12) in this story of love and loyalty marked by romance (I Samuel 18:1-5), secret meetings (I Samuel 20:1-23; 35-42), kissing and weeping (I Samuel 20:41), refusal to eat (I Samuel 28:32-34), and the explicit warrior/lover covenant which David keeps after Jonathan's death (I Samuel 20:12-17; 42).

One cannot read this account without discerning that Jonathan was the love of David's life. Centuries of homophobic Biblical interpretations have kept them in the closet too long!

## Homosexuality and the Bible:

### Some Important Questions

Is that all there is? A few prophecies about barrenness and eunuchs and only two same-sex couples? There is more, and scholars need to explore the possibilities: Are the eunuchs in the Joseph story (Genesis 39-45) and the Book of Esther also gay, residing in royal courts, and rescuing God's leaders?

In the parable of the woman who has lost a coin (Luke 15), she had ten and lost one. Are gays and lesbians a lost coin joyfully rediscovered in our day? Gays and lesbians are now estimated to be ten percent of the population. Are they a tithe of humanity? Are they the leaven in the loaf of every culture?

A centurion petitions Jesus for the healing of a servant who is dear to him (Luke 7). The Greek word in Matthew 8 is *pais* meaning "*slave boy*", which commonly described a homosexual relationship in those times. Why did Jesus praise the faith of the centurion but not condemn his lifestyle?

Paul, the apostle, had no sympathy for heterosexuals who couldn't control their sexual desires. At the same time, his stormy relational life was centered around men, such as Timothy, Barnabas and Silas. Were his tirades against co-workers and churches, and his tireless missionary zeal partly a way to suppress his homosexuality?

In the story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10), "Jesus looking upon him loved him." What is the connection of embodied spirituality and this "love" for a needy stranger? What studies have been done about the eight times Jesus was said to "love" someone? How was Jesus' particular "love for individuals related to his sexuality?

What of Lydia (Acts 16), the independent, Gentile businesswoman, seller of purple and the first European Christian? There is no mention of her husband, or children, yet she is noted to have led a women's group to whom Paul preached. Was Lydia a lesbian? the color purple is often used in connection with royalty, or suffering and passion, or transformation and magic. It is the color which Jesus wore to the cross. Does the color purple also have gay and lesbian connotations in the bible and in Christian liturgical tradition?

### What difference does it make?

What difference does it make for gays and lesbians to dare see themselves in the Bible. It helps to know the people of the Bible as they were, not unrealistically assuming they were all heterosexual. In these references to gays and lesbians, there is no condemnation, and no cross-referencing to homophobic interpretations of the story of Sodom or Levitical law. It invites lesbian and gay communities to fearlessly read the Bible, to apply its healing and empowering message to their lives.

## Footnotes to "Our Story Too"

1) Consultation of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, on "Biblical Issues and Homosexuality," Unpublished papers, 1987. Six infamous passages in the Bible are used against gays and lesbians-all of which must be taken out of context when directed against them. A thorough, yet concise, commentary on these passages is provided in the pamphlet, *Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness*, by Rev. Donald Eastman, referenced below.

2) This section, "Same-Sex Relationships," is indebted to Tom Horner's *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1978.

3) This section, "Important Questions," is indebted to Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984.

## Further Reading:

The following sources are recommended for those wishing to more carefully study related issues:

Boyd, Malcolm and Nancy L. Wilson (1991). *Amazing Grace: Stories of Lesbian & Gay Faith*. Freedom: Crossing Press.

Eastman, Donald (1990). **Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness**. Los Angeles: Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

McNeill, John J. (1988). *The Church and the Homosexual*. Boston: Beacon Press. Orig. pub. 1976.

Schussler Fiorenza, Elisabeth (1988). *In Memory of Her*. New York: Crossroads Publishing Company.

Spong, John Shelby (1991). *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.