

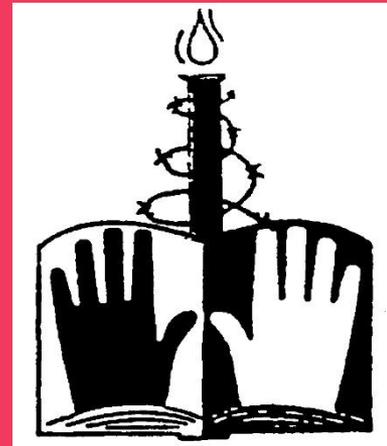
The Bible and Homosexuality

Gerald West

School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics

& Ujamaa Centre

University of KwaZulu-Natal



Overview

The Bible 'says'

Jesus 'says'

The Old Testament 'says'

The New Testament 'says'

Our theology 'says'

What do we 'say'?

The Bible 'says'

The Bible does not 'say' anything

What the Bible 'says' is created in the interface between the text and the reader

A reader is required before the Bible 'speaks'

Who we are as readers is as significant for the interpretive process as the biblical text itself

Furthermore, biblical texts do not 'speak' with a single voice on a whole range of issues; the Bible is dialogical, allowing us to hear a number of 'voices'

Jesus 'says'

For Christians, though the whole Bible is important, the clearest and fullest revelation is in the gospels, reflecting the 'voice' of Jesus Christ

So what do the gospels and Jesus 'say' about 'homosexuality'?

Nothing!

Indeed, the teaching and praxis of Jesus are radically inclusive, embracing those who the dominant religious traditions of his time exclude and marginalize

For example, Jesus 'says' the following to those who consider themselves the custodians of the scriptures (the Bible):

"Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying,

¹⁹ "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

²⁰ There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children;

²¹ and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise;

²² none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died.

²³ In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her."

²⁴ Jesus said to them, "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" "

(Mark 12:18-24 NRSV)

The Old Testament 'says'

It is not clear that the OT/Hebrew Bible 'says' anything about 'homosexuality', because sex in the ancient Near East, including ancient 'Israel', is about male power and hierarchy

The key question was who was permitted 'to penetrate' whom

Elite, free males were permitted 'to penetrate' their wives, their slaves, and other subordinate males

For an elite, free male to be penetrated was to be socially stigmatised for behaving 'like a woman'

Is this what we today mean by 'homosexuality'?

Genesis (18 and) 19

The story of Sodom begins, not in Genesis 19, but in Genesis 18

Reading the story in this 'larger' literary context makes it clear that the text is about hospitality, not homosexuality

Abraham receives the angels with lavish hospitality [in chapter 18]

When these same angels make their way to Sodom, Lot receives them with hospitality [in chapter 19]

But 'the men of Sodom' treat the angels/men with excessive violence, intending to rape them and so shame and dominate these strangers

All the other biblical texts that refer to this story understand it as a story about injustice, not homosexuality (see Isaiah 1:7-17; Ezekiel 16:48-50; Luke 10:10-12/Matthew 10:14-15); in Luke and Matthew it is Jesus who 'says' this!

For a similar story with a similar message see Judges 19; in this story it is a woman who starts the story by asserting her independence and agency; she ends up being gang raped and dismembered. This is also a story of threatened male rape and xenophobia

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

²² You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Lev 18:22 NRSV)

¹³ If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. (Lev 20:13 NRSV)

The context of these laws is the 'Holiness Code', where there is an attempt to demarcate the boundary between the 'clean' and the 'unclean'; the boundaries of familial and gender relationships; and the boundaries between 'Israel' and 'Canaan'

Again, it is not clear that these laws address modern understandings of 'homosexuality'

'Homosexuality' for us is not about concerns of mixing 'substances' like semen and excrement, or securing the hierarchy of the patriarchal family, or maintaining a form of ethnic identity

Genesis 1-3

Though these texts 'say' nothing about 'homosexuality', they are used to assert the normative sexuality – heterosexuality

But while in some of the details of the story they do, in others they do not

Let's look more closely: is 'the product' or 'the process' normative?

The 'product' is heterosexual sex

The 'process' is recognition of the one God has created for us
(see underlined parts)

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens,

⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung; ...

⁷ then the LORD God formed man [an earth creature] from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his [its] nostrils the breath of life; and the man [the earth creature] became a living being.

⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man [the earth creature] whom he had formed.

...

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man [earth creature] and put hi [it] m in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ...

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man [the earth creature] should be alone; I will make him [it] a helper as his [its] partner."

¹⁹ So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man [the earth creature] to see what he [it] would call them; and whatever the man [the earth creature] called every living creature, that was its name.

²⁰ The man [the earth creature] gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man [the earth creature] there was not found a helper as his [its] partner.

²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man [the earth creature], and he [it] slept; then he took one of his [its] ribs and closed up its place with flesh.

²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man [the earth creature] he made into a woman and brought her to the man [the earth creature].

²³ Then the man [the earth creature] said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Gen 2:4-25 NRSV)

The New Testament 'says'

As we have seen, Jesus says nothing about 'homosexuality'

Significantly, neither Jesus nor Paul follow the 'normative' heterosexual pattern; neither of them have sex with or marry a woman

Both are products of the Graeco-Roman world, within which it was considered shameful for an elite, free man to be penetrated (as in the ancient Near East)

Sex in the Graeco-Roman world is not intrinsically relational or collaborative in character; it is about hierarchical power, and divides and classifies participants into distinct and opposed categories; the basic distinction is between the 'active' (male) and the 'passive' (female), between the dominant and the submissive, between the penetrator and the penetrated

While Jesus rejects the norms of his cultural context, Paul struggles to be as radical

Paul yearns for a community where “²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. (Galatians 3:28 NRSV)

But Paul is also deeply worried about the early Christian church ‘being respectable’, and so tries his best to make it conform to the Graeco-Roman norms

Specifically:

In Romans Paul is worried about uncontrolled passions of any kind (valuing the Graeco-Roman masculine virtue of self-control)

In 1 Corinthians Paul is worried about any form of behaviour that has the potential to further divide the economically divided church in Corinth

In 1 Timothy ‘Paul’ (probably Paul’s disciples) is overtly worried about conforming to the structure of the Graeco-Roman household

Jesus is less concerned about conforming to the dominant norms, and more concerned about embracing and including those on the margins

Our theology 'says'

Given that the Bible says nothing or very little about contemporary notions of 'homosexuality', where do Christians get their contemporary perspectives from?

From the theological frameworks of our churches!

Our churches process and pre-digest the Bible for us, reading 'into' the Bible as much they read 'out' of the Bible, using their theological traditions to provide a framework within which to make sense of the Bible

In some respects, we have no option; in many areas the Bible offers no clear perspective; indeed, it often offers diverse perspectives on a particular matter

So we must 'contend' for what the Bible 'says', and be clear about 'the shape' of our theological frameworks

For example, we could ask whether our theology on sexuality is 'good news' (Luke 4:16-21) for the sexual margins of our society?

What do we 'say'?

The majority of church traditions in South Africa have adopted the position that 'homosexuality' is 'unChristian'; 'love the sinner and hate the sin' is the dominant theology

But what do we 'say'?

Do we follow the inclusive and affirming ministry of Jesus, where the issue of one's sexual orientation is a 'non-issue'?

Or do we follow the prevailing theological traditions of our churches, where sex is still about male dominance, power, and hierarchy?

As Jesus said to those who were confident they knew what the scriptures and theological tradition 'said' about the resurrection: "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" (Mark 12:24 NRSV)

I have no doubt that Jesus 'says' something similar to those who claim that the scriptures condemn homosexuality!

Where do we 'err'?

If the biblical texts are not clear about 'homosexuality', where do we 'err', with those who condemn and exclude or with Jesus who accepts and includes?

Where do we 'lean', towards inclusion or exclusion?

Why?

What are the values of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'?

Is 'righteousness' about justice or moral piety?

⁷ Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn *for* my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:7-8)

Why do we focus on this issue?

Jesus says nothing about 'homosexuality', yet the churches have focussed on this issue.

Jesus says many times that the rich will not enter the kingdom of God, yet the churches do not focus on this issue.

Why?