

The Power of the Bible

By Rev. Mona West, Ph.D.

The Bible is a powerful book. What is more important to realize is that *interpretations of the Bible* are just as powerful. New Testament scholar, Mary Ann Tolbert, points out that every interpretation of a text in the Bible is a combination of the stories themselves and the interests, commitments, and beliefs of the person or groups reading the stories.

Different Voices Interpreting Scripture

Because the Bible was written centuries ago and came from an ancient near eastern culture, it is difficult at times to know exactly what the Bible says about certain issues—especially contemporary ones. For a long time it was thought that the best way, the scientific way, of interpreting the Bible was to discover the original intent of the author of a particular biblical passage. It was also thought that meaning could only be found in the words of the text of the Bible itself.

However, in the 1980's this approach to interpreting the Bible was called into question, most specifically by women. Feminist approaches to scripture discovered that what had been presented as 'objective' and 'scientific' biblical interpretations, were actually forms of interpretation done from the bias of a particular group: white, heterosexual men with a Eurocentric focus—a group that had been (and continues to be) in positions of power in universities and seminaries where the Bible is studied and biblical interpretation is taught. This same group also dominated (and still does) pulpits where the Bible is interpreted. Feminists and other groups discovered that there has been a long legacy of biblical interpretation that kept a certain group in power. Such groups influence the way the Bible is read and understood in any given society.

Once this bias was exposed by feminists, there were other groups that began to realize they had been left out of the interpretive enterprise: African, Latin, Asian and Native peoples in particular. These groups began to add their own voices and understandings to biblical interpretation.

Readers Make Meaning

In addition to these new voices, the theological community has also shifted the focus of how meaning is made when one reads and interprets a biblical text. Not only can there be meaning in the author's original intent (which in many cases may never be known with an ancient text like the Bible), but

meaning can be derived by the reader. Meaning actually happens in the interaction between reader and text. This concept has greatly impacted biblical interpretation because now who is reading the text is just as important as who wrote the text.

There really is no unbiased, objective reading of the Bible. All of us bring a particular 'self' to the text; a self that is shaped by a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religious affiliation, socioeconomic standing, education, and sexual orientation. Readers are also members of specific communities and personal history with that community shapes the way they approach a biblical text. These unique perspectives of readers are called one's social location. Another term for social location is 'community situation approach.' The community's life experiences and the relation of scripture to the community's needs determine the ways in which the community makes sense of texts in the Bible. Each group finds a point, or points, of reference from which to read, reclaim and re-appropriate the meaning of scripture for the community in liberating and affirming ways. In African American communities the point of reference is often the theme of deliverance. In gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) communities, the point of reference is often the theme of coming out.

Ironically, the readers most in touch with their social locations as they relate to the Bible are members of communities who have been marginalized because of the dominant group's use of scripture against them. Women and African Americans for example have traced the history of biblical interpretation within their own communities and identified key concerns and strategies for appropriating and reclaiming scripture.

GLBT people also have a particular history with the Bible. Like women and African Americans, the Bible has been used against us to justify oppression. And like women and African Americans, we have developed strategies for appropriating and reclaiming scripture.

A Brief History of GLBT Biblical Interpretation

The history of GLBT biblical interpretation can be traced through the preaching and scholarship that has taken place in Metropolitan Community Church, a denomination founded in 1968 by Rev. Troy Perry. The Bible has been read and interpreted consistently and intentionally in the classrooms and pulpits of MCC congregations since the beginning of this denomination. More than any other community, the members of MCC have brought their particular life experiences to bear on reading and interpreting scripture in liberating ways for GLBT people.

A handful of scriptures that are used against the GLBT community to promote homophobia and violence. These texts are often called the 'clobber passages' because of the abusive way they have been used. Over the years, GLBT biblical interpretation has moved from a defensive stance toward the Bible, to an offensive stance. For instance, historical criticism and linguistics demonstrated that there is much ambiguity concerning the translation and interpretation of such words as yadah 'to know' in Genesis 19, mishkav zakur 'the lyings of a male' in the Leviticus passages, para pusin 'against nature' in Romans 1, malakoi 'soft' in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1.

More recently GLBT people have moved toward embracing the Bible as a friendly text. Instead of limiting our energies to always defending ourselves against a few obscure passages, energy is being spent on reading the whole Bible as the Word of God for our community.

This offensive stance assumes that there is more to addressing the message of the Bible than just silencing the clobber passages. This offensive stance includes identifying texts that affirm same sex love and the goodness of human sexuality. The stories of Jonathan and David and Ruth and Naomi have been preached from many MCC pulpits as examples of same sex love. The Song of Songs has been lifted up as a text that celebrates the joy of human sexuality which is not measured by marital or procreative status.

Reading Strategies

In addition to this particular history of biblical interpretation, GLBT biblical interpreters share at least three reading strategies with feminists that disarm harmful interpretations of biblical texts and highlight the positive role of scripture: a revisionist approach, imaginative identification, and, as previously mentioned, social location.

For feminists, the revisionist approach attempts to rediscover all the information about women that still can be found in biblical writings. GLBT biblical interpreters have used this strategy to rediscover all the information we can about same sex relationships in the Bible. The feminist revisionist approach also seeks to address layers of androcentric (emphasizing masculine interests or point of view) interpretation of biblical texts, claiming that biblical texts themselves are not misogynist but have been patriarchalized by interpreters who have projected their androcentric cultural bias onto biblical texts. Likewise, GLBT scholars have claimed that the Bible has nothing to say in the current debate about homosexuality as a sexual orientation and any attempts to use scripture in the debate is the result of the homophobic bias of the interpreter. Also, along with feminists, GLBT biblical interpreters have learned Greek and Hebrew in order to correct false translations and commentaries.

The feminist reading strategy of *imaginative identification* imagines or assumes women characters in biblical stories where they might not be explicitly mentioned. For example it would stand to reason (or imagination) that the daughters of Israel would be gathered at Sinai if the sons of Israel were there.

Nancy Wilson, in her book *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, applies imaginative identification to biblical texts and claims that if at any given time in history and cultures there have been a percentage of people who have a same sex orientation then it would stand to reason and imagination that some of these people are in the biblical story. She wonders if the eunuchs—sexual minorities in the biblical story—might be the spiritual ancestors of gay and lesbian people today. How might their roles as ‘go betweens,’ and mediators be related to a similar priestly function of ‘two spirited’ (transgender) peoples in ancient tribal cultures?

The Formative Power of Scripture

All three reading strategies are important for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. They are necessary for our survival—physical and spiritual. They begin to move us toward the Bible as a friendly text, rather than a text of terror.

Still another shift needs to take place for GLBT people of faith and our relationship with the Bible. All of the strategies outlined approach the Bible as an object to be studied, interpreted or debated. They function in the realm of reading for information. We are the ones asking questions of the text, its history, its interpretation.

As gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people begin to feel safe with the Bible we will be able to trust the formative power of scripture. In addition to reading the Bible for information, we must read the Bible for formation—our spiritual formation. In our desire to grow spiritually, all of us, regardless of sexual orientation, are invited by the Holy Spirit to let the Word of God read us.

Sources for Further Study

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