

# **The Queer-positive Bible**

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**by**

**Vaughn Roste (B.A., B.T.S)**

## I. Introduction

In contemporary Christianity, there is probably no single issue more contentious and no debate more acrimonious than that which surrounds the discussion of homosexuality and the church. Questions of justice are often contrasted with questions of biblical faithfulness; even those new to the discussion quickly become familiar with such terms as “hermeneutic” (studying the process of Biblical interpretation) and the necessity of putting Bible passages into their proper context. Perhaps understandingly, much has been made of the six<sup>1</sup> infamous “clobber” passages - those few biblical passages that are purported to be proscriptions against homosexual behavior. This is done by theologians and lobbyists on both sides of the interpretive fence: either anti-gay positions will quote them and counter context-particular arguments, or those holding gay-positive positions feel the need to take a defensive stance with these texts and try to explain them. There is not much controversy in the statement that these six passages do not on the surface condone homosexual behavior. Just to what extent these passages are relevant to the contemporary situation is a matter of serious debate and one that will be left to other arenas. This paper asks, “but what of the remaining 31,156 verses of the Bible? Are there other neglected parts of Scripture that might be interpreted as speaking more positively toward the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and (yes, even) transgender<sup>2</sup> experience?” There are three stories in the Hebrew Bible (commonly referred to as the Old Testament) that can be interpreted as having a positive message to say to queer people today and two in the Greek Bible - the New Testament. After examining each of these texts in chronological order, this paper will go on to briefly illustrate how a multitude of Biblical stories can be interpreted to apply to the contemporary queer experience and have a positive, rather than condemning, message for queer people today.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 19 talks of Sodom and Gomorrah; Leviticus 18:20 calls “men lying with men as with a woman” an “abomination” and 20:13 gives the death penalty for the same offense; Romans 1:26-27 mentions men and women “giving up natural relations for unnatural ones”; and both I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:9-10 utilize obscure Greek words often translated as “homosexual perverts” in lists that outline those who “will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.”

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the word “queer” will be used as a non-pejorative, all-inclusive term to refer to all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) people.

## **Why Queer People Must Also Claim the Bible as Their Own**

The importance of this process cannot be underestimated for queer people. In their ongoing struggle for equal status both inside of and outside the church, the same six passages have been repeatedly quoted as a means of silencing queer voices and justifying their experience of marginalization. Thus, for queer Christians to reclaim the Bible as their own document, and not merely one used in their oppression, is often a crucial step in their own journeys as they go through the process of reconciling their sexual and spiritual natures. One can thus turn a document often regarded as an enemy into an ally. As L. William Countryman and M. R. Ritley say in their most recent publication:

We are perfectly normal gay and lesbian people. So the question becomes, how do we arrive at a history, a narrative, that includes us? We can't just make one up out of thin air, any more than the Israelites who fled from Egypt could. Scripture has always been a resource for people in search of an identity, in search of a history, in search of a God. The closest parallel I can think of is what happened in the United States with the slaves who were brought over from Africa. They were people who had been uprooted from their own histories, their own families, their own tribes. It is in itself a powerful statement that white Americans refer to these people as a monochromatic group, "the slaves," as if they were an indistinguishable mass. They emphatically did not see themselves that way in the beginning. They were people deeply embedded in different traditions and languages, proud of tribal achievements, rooted in the past of their own people. The first act of deliberate genocide rested on the suppression of their language and religion, the separation of members of tribal groups so that their histories would effectively be lost within a generation, thereby rendering them even more powerless and docile.

Fortunately, the slave owners assumed that introducing their slaves to Christianity would make them more docile yet, especially when they could quote, "Slaves, obey your masters," and, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer him the other." Oh, yes, this would make them meek and biddable. The great irony was that they had placed in the slaves' hands the most radical, dangerous, and subversive document on earth!

In the African slaves' story, we see a clear illustration of the gospel of subversion. Because what happened to them is exactly what happened to the fugitive slaves from Egypt and the ragtag of the Gentile Mediterranean. These enslaved, uprooted people, with no history of their own, had been handed an incredibly incendiary resource in the Old Testament. They appropriated the text and made its history theirs. Think, for a moment, of the power of some of the spirituals they wrote and sang in plain sight and hearing of their masters: "Go down, Moses. ...," "Let my people go ...," "There is a balm in Gilead ...," "There's a great jubilee a-

comin'." Think of the slave-owning family smiling patronizingly while their slaves danced and sang, "O Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn. Pharaoh's army got drowned!" Amen!

At the core, they were able to appropriate images that were no more theirs historically than American history is mine biologically. History happens in the creative leap of the imagination. The appropriation of that biblical text by the African American community sustained and gave it a future in which it believed fiercely. It seized the images of the enslaved Israelites, for whom God has [been - *sic*] the powerful deliverer. It wielded the words of the prophets like weapons. Can anyone hear the recording of Martin Luther King Jr., quoting the prophet Amos and not be moved: "Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"? It brings the hair up on the back of your neck, because that text is so deeply embedded in our culture, is so powerful, that it becomes the basis of a people's history, and its power is ours to appropriate.

What you and I and other gay and lesbian Christians are about is something very similar. We who have been shorn of our history must create one. Not out of thin air, but out of the word, the presence, the reality of God, and God's astonishing and passionate love for those who have been forced to the margins. We can claim the history of deliverance because we represent exactly those people whom God has always called out to.<sup>3</sup>

Countryman and Ritley later point out that "it's important for each of us to understand that no one owns Scripture, that every single one of us has the right to appropriate it."<sup>4</sup> Just as the early Christians had no qualms whatever about appropriating the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures from the Jews, so should queer Christians today have no compunction whatsoever about using the same process. In fact, it is a process in which they need to engage for their own spiritual well-being.

## **II. The Old Testament**

### **A. Ruth and Naomi**

From this necessity, then, let us examine three Old Testament texts in the light of what positive messages they might hold for queers today. There are three stories that we will examine in turn: the first is from the short book of Ruth. From chapter one in the book of Ruth we have the situation established: a famine in Bethlehem prompts a man named Elimelech to travel with his wife Naomi to Moab, with his two sons Mahlon and Kilion. Shortly after their arrival Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi dependent on her two

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<sup>3</sup> Countryman and Ritley, "Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church" (Harrisburg Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), 92-93.

sons for survival. (It hardly needs to be pointed out how dependent women in ancient times were on men for their economic survival). Her two sons take wives, named Orpah and Ruth, but then they also die, leaving these three women together with no stronger bonds than deceased in-law relationships. Now that the famine has ended, there is no reason to stay longer in Moab, so Naomi prepares to return home. The question then becomes whether or not Ruth and Orpah, both Moabites, are going to follow Naomi to a foreign country. Naomi suggests not, that there is no reason to: both can stay in their home country where they might have a hope of someday remarrying. Orpah agrees and takes her leave, but Ruth somehow has more attachment; as verse 14 says, “Ruth clung to her [Naomi].” We then hear Ruth utter the following words, repeated very often at heterosexual weddings, most apparently unaware that they were originally spoken between two women:

<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said:

"Entreat me not to leave you,  
Or to turn back from following after you;  
For wherever you go, I will go;  
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people shall be my people,  
And your God, my God.

<sup>17</sup>Where you die, I will die,  
And there will I be buried.  
The LORD do so to me, and more also,  
If anything but death parts you and me."<sup>5</sup>

And so Ruth stays with Naomi and they both move back to Judah, Naomi's homeland. Two women living together have a hard time economically in ancient Israel, and so are forced to glean leftover barley from what the harvesting workers unintentionally leave behind. Naomi and Ruth stick it out though, and eventually Naomi is able to find favour in the eyes of a distant relative named Boaz and Naomi is able to set up a meeting between Boaz and Ruth so that Boaz eventually marries Ruth.

One can point to the heterosexual marriage mentioned in this book, but the male characters are certainly not the protagonists in Ruth and one notes that it is only through

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 94.

Ruth's affection for Naomi that she followed her to a foreign country in the first place. Only those who have encountered the strains that living in a strange land with different a language, laws and culture can put on a relationship can truly understand what motivated Ruth to forsake her homeland for her mother-in-law. Additionally one should also note that it is Naomi who arranges the marriage between Ruth and Boaz, ensuring that Ruth (and herself) will be cared for. So with the bonds of support, companionship, assistance, undying loyalty, and love that are evident in the Biblical story between these two women, what essential component was missing from the institution we call marriage? Naturally, no one can prove these two women had a sexual relationship with each other, but nor can anyone else prove that they did not. Lesbian behaviour would not have been a major concern in Bedouin society where the major sexual matter of importance was proving the paternity of children - if it had been taking place, it quite honestly could have been overlooked (if it was even known).

What is surprising, however, is that there is an obscure verse at the end of the book which seems to give textual credence to the idea that these two women were considered a family unit. After Boaz sleeps with Ruth, she gives birth to a child: "Also the neighbor women gave him a name, saying, 'There is a son born to Naomi.' And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David."<sup>6</sup> Note that it is Ruth who gives birth, but *Naomi* who has a son. Nor is it Naomi's grandson, which would have been closer to the genealogical lines, but a son. It is almost as if Ruth and Naomi are seen as being together the parents of this child (which, in a way, they were: Ruth who gave birth and Naomi who conceived the idea, so to speak, for Ruth to sleep with Boaz). In this story Boaz is reduced to an effective sperm-donor, and all other males are marginalized - highly irregular in a patriarchal society. This is part of the reason why scholars suspect Ruth was one of the only books of the Bible to be written by a woman (if not the only book). What contemporary society seems (for whatever reason) to be reluctant to consider is that this ancient text may also include the first description of a same-sex marriage.

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth 1:16-17 (*NKJV*). The "do so to me" of verse 17 was likely accompanied by a chopping motion indicating dismemberment or beheading; the context obviously refers to a violent act and underlines the depth of the love that Ruth had for Naomi.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth 4:17 (*NKJV*)

## **B. David and Jonathan**

Following this line of thought, then, one must also consider that gay people writing in earlier ages had to find ways of communicating that would not raise the ire of the heterosexual establishment. Overt mentions of same-sex behaviour would only be too likely to be edited if they were explicitly mentioned, leaving contemporary scholars to sometimes approach texts with a “hermeneutic of suspicion” in interpreting Biblical texts - or what laypeople might call “reading between the lines.” If we turn now to the story of David and Jonathan in the Bible, we see that by reading in-between the lines one can come up with a story much different than the “platonic friendship” model often imposed by heterocentric readings.

The first thing that one needs to do is approach the story of David and Jonathan with an open mind. Take the following two verses as an example. 1 Samuel 18:20 says “Now Saul's daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased” (NIV). A mere two chapters earlier the Bible relates that “Jonathan loved David as himself.”<sup>7</sup> When the Bible mentions the word love in a heterosexual context, why does no one have any problems with assuming that this is a romantic attraction, but presume that the same word could only refer to a platonic model when a same-sex relationship is discussed?

To first relate the background of the story, the Kingdom of Israel had only recently been united by a monarchy; in fact, Jonathan’s father Saul was the first king of Israel. He had been anointed by the prophet Samuel to this position, but later had displeased the Lord by refusing to obey an explicit instruction, and so Samuel had gone to Bethlehem to anoint Saul’s successor. Samuel selected David, a handsome shepherd boy who also happened to be a very talented harpist (not an insignificant number of Psalms are said to be composed by him). Saul would get David to play the harp for him to calm his irritable moods. This is the same David who had the military success where Saul had failed, in single-handedly defeating the giant Goliath. Thus the stage is set for the hero of the story: David was already described as being successful in battle, a talented

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 18:1 (NIV)

musician, an intelligent and eloquent speaker, popular hero, and good-looking (see 1 Samuel 16:12). It would be no wonder why all would fall in love with him, be they individuals or nations.

One individual then, besides Michal, who seems to have done so is certainly Jonathan. 1 Samuel 18:1-3 relates how Jonathan and David met:

<sup>1</sup>After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. <sup>2</sup>From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. <sup>3</sup>And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. (NIV)

One should note that the Old Testament mentions only one other covenant between men who are social equals, that between Joseph and Laban in Gen 31:44. Whatever this relationship was, it is already set in the context of being something special. It was also certainly very intense: the King James Version relates that “<sup>1</sup>...the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” The words used to describe the emotions may change over the centuries, but the essential emotions are not likely to: we are likely talking about love at first sight here.

Further evidence is found in the ritual, strange to modern ears, described in 1 Samuel 18:4: “<sup>4</sup>Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt” (NIV). Or, as the King James Version offers: “<sup>4</sup>And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.” Here Jonathan is signifying the profound sincerity of the covenant he has made with David here, and it is going much further than the mere giving of gifts: Jonathan’s actions here are symbolic. It would be highly irregular for the social superior to voluntarily give up all the trappings of his power over one of his subjects - yet this is exactly what Jonathan does. Further, stripping someone of all of their weapons is an act that is committed upon soldiers who are captured. Jonathan here is giving David an object lesson in illustrating his feelings of affection; he is, essentially, saying “You have made me a prisoner of war.” Because of the tensions between the house of David and Saul (Saul wanted Jonathan to succeed him as King of Israel, but Samuel’s anointing of David presented a serious challenge to Jonathan’s secession), Jonathan’s act here is tantamount to committing an



act of treachery against his own family. The text seems to be saying that he feels he has no choice in the matter, for he is his own prisoner of his love for David.

Two further comments should be made about this text. The first is that once Jonathan has removed his belt, bow, sword, robe and garments, what is he left wearing? He's not naked, but he's certainly not left with much is he? Finally, one should also note that this ceremony is taking place in public - it had to be witnessed, as a private act between two individuals is hardly likely to be recorded in the history of a people. Jonathan here is making a public statement about his allegiances which transcend his family loyalties. The inherent risk in that action and the courage it must have required only testifies to the importance of the emotion which must have motivated it.

For the risk involved was by no means negligible. In pre-constitutional monarchies, of course, the king held absolute power. To defy the king, even if you are blood-related, was to risk death. This was in fact what Saul wanted for David, his rival for the throne: "Saul told his son Jonathan and all the attendants to kill David. But Jonathan was very fond of David and warned him, 'My father Saul is looking for a chance to kill you. Be on your guard tomorrow morning; go into hiding and stay there.'"<sup>8</sup> Jonathan here is risking his life for the chief contender to succeed his father - someone he could well view as his adversary. Moreover, Saul was aware of the relationship between David and Jonathan, something that must have infuriated him. As 1 Sam 20:3 relates, "But David took an oath and said [to Jonathan], 'Your father knows very well that I have found favor in your eyes'" (NIV). The New Living Translation here has David saying "Your father knows perfectly well about our friendship." This is a less literal translation of the same thing. How much of a leap is it to change the words "friendship" in the latter translation into "relationship"? If one does that, all of a sudden there is ample room for understanding the same-sex relationship between David and Jonathan as not being platonic.

Further Biblical evidence abounds. As Jonathan believes that David has the Lord's favour and is destined to succeed his father Saul, he gets David to swear his undying loyalty to him in 1 Sam 20:14-17.

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Sam 19: 1-2 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup>“But show me unfailing kindness like that of the Lord as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, <sup>15</sup>and do not ever cut off your kindness from my family - not even when the Lord has cut off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth.’ <sup>16</sup>So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, ‘May the Lord call David's enemies to account.’ <sup>17</sup>And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself” (NIV).

Again, the King James Version states it even stronger: “<sup>17</sup>And Jonathan caused David to swear again, because he loved him: for he loved him as he loved his own soul.” How many times can the Biblical story underline the situation of love between these two men before the assertion that their relationship was purely platonic must be viewed with at least a modicum of suspicion?

There is another anecdote in the story of David and Jonathan which merits discussion at length. After David has fled the palace, fearing Saul’s attempts to kill him, the Biblical story relates the following events:

<sup>25</sup>He [Saul] sat in his customary place by the wall, opposite Jonathan, and Abner sat next to Saul, but David's place was empty. <sup>26</sup>Saul said nothing that day, for he thought, "Something must have happened to David to make him ceremonially unclean-surely he is unclean." <sup>27</sup>But the next day, the second day of the month, David's place was empty again. Then Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Why hasn't the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?"

<sup>28</sup>Jonathan answered, "David earnestly asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem. <sup>29</sup>He said, 'Let me go, because our family is observing a sacrifice in the town and my brother has ordered me to be there. If I have found favor in your eyes, let me get away to see my brothers.' That is why he has not come to the king's table."

<sup>30</sup>Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? <sup>31</sup> As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he must die!"<sup>9</sup>

The important verse to highlight in this passage is verse 30, which includes a rather surprising outburst by Saul that seems unprovoked. The King James Version for this verse has Saul shouting “Do not I know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own confusion, and unto the confusion of thy mother's nakedness?” To understand what

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Sam 20: 25-31 (NIV)

Saul might be referring to here, let us turn to Tom Horner's commentary on this passage in his book *Jonathan Loved David*:

Commentaries, too, are generally lax in pointing out the slight textual corruption in the verse.... [T]he [Hebrew] word *bocher*, represented here as "chosen," could also be read as *chaber*, "companion" or "fellow," and so it is read in the Greek version. The distinguished scholar, S. R. Driver, says that the Greek choice is unquestionably the one to be followed here.... Thus the entire Greek clause... could be translated, "For, do I not know that you are an intimate companion to the son of Jesse?"

Next, there is the evidence of the Hebrew word *bosheth*, poorly translated as "confusion" by the King James Version, but more correctly rendered "shame" in most modern translations. Both "shame" and "nakedness" - the next key word in Saul's outburst - are associated in the mainstream of Israelite patriarchal society with sex, as is illustrated by the Garden of Eden story and in numerous other passages. Captives were taken away naked to shame them; in that way too they could much more easily be taken advantage of sexually, as indeed they sometimes were....

One final thing to notice in connection with this key passage is the Semitic practice of refusing to pronounce the actual name of a person or group - or even thing, as in the case of homosexuality - that is being put down. There is either an epithet of some kind or no mention of the name or word at all - a phenomenon that is found throughout the Bible and a practice that may very well add to the difficulty of our tracing references to homosexuality and homosexual groups. There is, of course, more than one epithet or substitution to be found in this crucial passage: "son of Jesse" for David, "shame" and "nakedness" for sex. Thus, the implication of a homosexual relationship is clearly a part of Saul's outburst.<sup>10</sup>

There are three other passages that require mention as well. The first occurs very shortly after the above episode once Jonathan realizes that Saul truly desires to kill David and that David must flee - thus necessitating their saying goodbye. 1 Sam 20:41 relates how they part: "<sup>41</sup>...David... bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together - but David wept the most." (*NIV*) This, however, was not to be the last time they saw each other, despite the need for David to remain in hiding. They remained in communication, if not in contact, even during David's exile, as is evidenced by the following passage:

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 30-31.

<sup>14</sup>And David stayed in strongholds in the wilderness, and remained in the mountains in the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, but God did not deliver him into his hand. <sup>15</sup>So David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. And David was in the Wilderness of Ziph in a forest. <sup>16</sup>Then Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David in the woods and strengthened his hand in God. <sup>17</sup>And he said to him, "Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Even my father Saul knows that." <sup>18</sup>So the two of them made a covenant before the LORD. And David stayed in the woods, and Jonathan went to his own house.<sup>11</sup>

What is particularly noticeable is that while Saul searches in vain for David, somehow Jonathan, his own son, knows exactly where to find him. Another crucial phrase too easily glossed over is verse 17, where Jonathan says "You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you" Monarchies hardly had room for power-sharing, and certainly Jonathan's father Saul set a very poor precedent for that in Israel. Who sits at the King's right hand? Only the Queen! Jonathan seems to have a very idealistic dream of how this struggle for the throne of Israel is going to turn out if he truly believes that David will be King and Jonathan at his side to live happily ever after. Was it not more common for monarchs to put to death (or exile at the least) all potential rivals to the throne? Jonathan seems to have a confident trust in David's love for him, one that definitely transcends common expectations. Not to mention a hope for the future that borders on fantasy in its lack of consideration for the practical realities involved.

Of course, as the story goes, everything was not to turn out as blissfully as that. Jonathan ended up being killed in a battle with the Philistines with his father (1 Samuel 31:1-6). In the end the prophet Samuel was correct, and David did succeed Saul as the second King of Israel. Most telling about the relationship between David and Jonathan (and words that are hard not to interpret any other way than to infer a same-sex relationship) are David's lament for Jonathan once he hears about Jonathan's and Saul's deaths.

How I weep for you, my brother Jonathan!  
Oh, how much I loved you!  
And your love for me was deep,  
deeper than the love of women!<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Sam 23:14-18 (*NKJV*)

<sup>12</sup> 2 Sam 1:26 (*NLT*)

A love “deeper than the love of women” could be a platonic relationship, but examined in the light of the Biblical evidence, hardly seems likely. Tom Horner offers the following in response to that assertion:

“But cannot two men be good friends," someone said to me recently, "without the issue of homosexuality being raised?" Yes, they can. But *when* the two men come from a society that for two hundred years had lived in the shadow of the Philistine culture, which accepted homosexuality; *when* they find themselves in a social context that was thoroughly military in the Eastern sense; *when* one of them - who is the social superior of the two - publicly makes a display of his love; *when* the two of them make a lifetime pact openly; *when* they meet secretly and kiss each other and shed copious tears at parting; *when* one of them proclaims that his love for the other surpassed his love for women - and *all* this is present in the David - Jonathan liaison - we have every reason to believe that a homosexual relationship existed.<sup>13</sup>

### **C. Eunuchs**

There is one more passage that one should consider in the Old Testament in our discussion of queer-positive Bible stories, and to delve into this context properly we should examine this story in the light of what the New Testament says about eunuchs.<sup>14</sup> Eunuchs typically were castrated males who were often employed in the service of taking care of the King’s harem, as they were the only men who could certainly be trusted with such a precious commodity. Scholars such as John J. McNeill and Samuel Kader have published opinions lately supposing that the Biblical discussions of eunuchs could refer directly to what we would call gay people today. If one assumes the essentialist position, in that the origins of homosexuality are biological (and not socially constructed), then one argues that there likely has been gay and lesbian people existing through-out history, and to suppose that one might label such individuals “eunuchs” in ancient times does not require a huge leap of the imagination. By what other word would a gay person living in Biblical times chose to categorize himself? In this light, one can see as especially perceptive the words of Jesus concerning eunuchs: “For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept

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<sup>13</sup> Horner, 27-28.

it."<sup>15</sup> In other words, some people are eunuchs because they have chosen to be celibate (one thinks readily of monastics), others because they were made that way by men (castrated), and others because (it seems) they were born that way - born incapable of having sex with women<sup>16</sup>. Assuming then, that eunuchs could be referring to the queer people of ancient times, let us read the following passage from the opening verses of the book of Daniel with that in mind:

<sup>1</sup>In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup>And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god. <sup>3</sup>Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility - <sup>4</sup>young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. <sup>5</sup>The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. <sup>6</sup>Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. <sup>7</sup>The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. <sup>8</sup>But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. <sup>9</sup>Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel...<sup>17</sup>

The important verse to highlight in this passage is the last one: one that the King James Version renders "Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs." Knowing that Ashpenaz, Nebuchadnezzar's chief court official was certainly a eunuch can call into the question the presumably platonic nature of his "tender love" for this intelligent and handsome young man named Daniel (v. 4).

One can further question how it was that Nebuchadnezzar seemingly implicitly trusted Ashpenaz of all his servants to go out and select only the brightest and best-looking

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<sup>14</sup> This process is admittedly counterintuitive, as it necessitates examining texts in the order contrary to the chronological sequence in which they were written.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 19:12 (*NIV*)

<sup>16</sup> Of course, this could refer to strictly to the impotent, but in a more liberal sense does objectively include gay men.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel 1: 1-9(*NIV*) This is how the major characters in this book of the Bible are introduced: Daniel was later to be thrown in the lion's den for refusing to observe the express commandments of the King, the setting for which is set up in this passage; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were later to be thrown in the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship idols.

young Israeli boys (v. 3-4). Now Daniel - chosen in part for his intelligence (v. 4) - was certainly sharp enough to know what was going on, and was bold enough to capitalize on the affections of Ashpenaz to approach him and request his permission to disobey the instructions of the King - as we know, an offense punishable by death. It is this act which later is to land him in the serious trouble of being thrown in a den of lions as punishment, but this is how the story begins. It seems only possible that God was using Ashpenaz's same-sex attraction to further God's own purposes. If so, queers today can claim Ashpenaz as their spiritual ancestor, and a representative of how queer people might be positively portrayed in the Bible.

If one is to understand eunuchs as potentially referring to the queer people of Biblical times, there is one final passage in the Old Testament which behooves mention. Seen in this light, Isaiah 56:3-5 can only be read as an explicit instruction from God NOT to exclude the sexually marginalized:

<sup>3</sup>Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." <sup>4</sup>For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup>I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off. (*RSV*)

According to this interpretation God seems to be promising the eventual inclusion of queer people in this passage, and one can only wonder if Isaiah's prophecy is not only finally coming true in the churches of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **III. The New Testament**

#### **A. Jesus and the Centurion**

Potentially the most queer-positive in the entire Bible comes from the Gospels, three of which (Matthew, Luke, and John) relate the story of Jesus's healing of the centurion's slave.

<sup>1</sup>After he had ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people he [Jesus] entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup>Now a centurion had a slave who was dear to him, who was sick and at the point of death. <sup>3</sup>When he heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his slave. <sup>4</sup>And when they came to Jesus, they

besought him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him,<sup>5</sup> for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue." <sup>6</sup>And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; <sup>7</sup>therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. <sup>8</sup>For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." <sup>9</sup>When Jesus heard this he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that followed him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." <sup>10</sup>And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well. (Luke 7:1-10, RSV)

The same story is related almost word-for-word in Matthew 8:5-13, as well as in John 4:46-54. However, as John relates it, the sick child is a nobleman's *son* - quite a difference, between purchased property and blood-related heir! Since the Gospel of John was the last Gospel to be written, and much later at that, most scholars view this version not as a separate story but more as a sanitized version of the same event and largely consider Matthew and Luke to be more authentic. In fact,

These two passages are so similar - especially when you line up the Greek texts, word for word - that scholars judge them to be based on the same written source. So we can take it that both Matthew and Luke are talking about the same situation.

Both quote the centurion saying he is not worthy to have Jesus enter his home. What is striking is this. The centurion uses two different Greek words when he speaks of his servants. He refers to the one who is sick as "my boy," *pais*. This word means boy and can also mean servant or even son. It refers to someone young and only by way of endearment to an adult. It is a word likely to refer to a slave used for male-male sex, and there is non-biblical evidence that *pais* sometimes meant male lover. In contrast, the centurion consistently refers to his other servants as *doulos*. This is the generic word for slave or servant. Matthew always refers to the centurion's servant as *pais*. Reading Matthew, one could think the centurion was concerned about his son. But Luke, except when he is quoting the centurion, always refers to the servant as *doulos*. Luke also reveals that the boy was very valuable or dear - the Greek word is *entimos* - to the centurion. In addition, Luke notes that the centurion built the local synagogue, so the centurion must have been wealthy. It is striking that both Matthew and Luke preserve the same quote of the centurion, which marks a difference between his *pais* and his *doulos*.

What can we make of all that? First, because of Luke's emphasis, it is clear that the servant was indeed a servant (*doulos*) and not the centurion's son. And as Matthew's emphasis indicates, the servant was young (*pais*).

Second, we know that the youth was *entimos* to the centurion. This word could mean a number of things. First, perhaps the centurion paid a high price for this slave and thus did not want to lose him. But this is an unlikely reading. The centurion was wealthy and, sad to say, could easily have gone to the market to



buy another slave. Second, a servant could be valuable if he were highly skilled and experienced, holding a key role in running the household. But this interpretation is also unlikely here since the boy was young. Finally, *entimos* could imply an emotional bond. This is the most likely meaning here.

Then what was the relationship between the centurion and the servant? There is no way of knowing for certain. The historical evidence is scanty. Perhaps the centurion was just a very good man and was troubled over the death of a sick slave boy. But this sentimental interpretation is modern. It is out of step with the harsh reality of life in the first-century Roman Empire. Then what would have driven a Roman centurion to go to so much trouble over a slave?

It was common that Roman householders would use their slaves for sex. It was also common for soldiers far from home to have a male sexual companion with them. The centurion and the slave boy were probably sexual partners. In this particular case, as often happened, the centurion probably fell in love with the young man. The most likely explanation of the centurion's behaviour is that the young slave was the centurion's lover.

Undoubtedly, Jesus was aware of such things. He was not dumb. He knew what was going on around him. So this seems to be a case where Jesus actually encountered a loving homosexual relationship. Jesus' reaction is instructive. He commended the faith of the centurion and returned the young man to the centurion in good health.

Did Jesus think homosexuality was okay? We do not know what Jesus thought.... But the incident of the centurion's slave boy does seem to have broader implications. On the basis of the evidence, one could argue that Jesus was not disturbed by the homogeneity of his day. Moreover, Matthew and Luke did not even bother to make an issue of it. For all of them, it was faith and good will that held their interest, not sexual practices.<sup>18</sup>

## **B. Jesus as pro-gay in general**

In addition, there are two other passages that one should address in determining what sort of attitude Jesus may have had towards queer people. The first is from Matt 11:8. Here Jesus is quoted as asking his disciples "Why then did you go out [to see John the Baptist]? To see a man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, those who wear soft raiment are in kings' houses." (*RSV*) The Greek word translated as "soft" in this passage is "*malakos*," and interestingly enough is the same word that is translated as "homosexuals" in some translations of 1 Timothy 1:9-10 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Contrary to Paul's use of the word is those later vice-lists,<sup>19</sup> Jesus's use of the term seems to have no moral implications whatsoever. To paraphrase Jesus's question, he seems to be asking colloquially, "what did you go out to see, a pansy?" with even a sense of melodious voice that could be interpreted as being either playful or coy. But being either

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel Helminiak, "What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality" (New Mexico: Alamo Square Press, 2000) 127-9. Admittedly, the passage raises some disquieting questions regarding possible approval of pederasty, as well as, on the larger level, to what extent Jesus was a merely product of his own culture.

playful or coy is a far cry from the judgemental voices of condemnation to which many queer individuals are subject at the hands of the Christian Church. If this is a correct interpretation of this word (and if it isn't, one has reason to question its inconsistent application from Matthew to 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy), Jesus (unlike Paul) doesn't seem to have had any issues with queer people at all.

Finally, one can even argue that Jesus on one occasion seems to have been defensive of queer people. There are scholars who as of late have pointed out that Matthew 5:22 can be read as proscription of gay-bashing.

<sup>22</sup>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, '*Raca*,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. (NIV)

As Rev. Samuel Kader observes in his book, "Openly Gay Openly Christian,"

Professor Paul Halsall in New York has noted that Matthew 5:22 appears to be a gay friendly scripture.... Here Jesus condemns anyone who calls his brother certain names, and may be in danger of judgment for doing so. In consulting the Greek text, according to Halsall the important words are *Raca/Rhaka*, and fool/*moros*. Professor Halsall comments, '*Rhaka* is not a Greek word. This seems to be its only occurrence in a Greek text... Most translations either ignore the word, or note it as a general term of abuse.... its roots in a variety of Semitic languages mean soft [Hebrew *rakha*] and carries a connotation of effeminacy or weakness.... In other words it can be argued that *Raca* [applied here to a brother] is an accusation of sissy, or perhaps catamite.'

Halsall further states "This argument works better if the word *moros* is considered. The word can mean fool, but it also has the amply used connotation of sexual aggressor, or even homosexual/ aggressor.... It could reasonably be argued then that Jesus's words here condemn those who abuse others about their homosexuality." In other words it could be translated as: "But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother sissy will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says You bugger will be liable to fiery Gehenna."

If this were the intent Jesus had when stating these words, then those who verbally abuse gays are themselves to be strongly criticized for calling gays unkind and cruel names.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Keep in mind that most scholars now agree that Paul was not the author of 1 Timothy.

<sup>20</sup> Rev. Samuel Kader, "Openly Gay, Openly Christian: How the Bible Really is Gay Friendly (San Francisco, Leyland Publications, 1999), 102.

Thus, a possible interpretation of this passage from Matthew coupled with Matthew 11:8 and the healing of the Centurion's slave seems to indicate that Jesus had no issues whatsoever with queer sexualities. This is indeed good news to today's queer Christians.

#### **IV. The Bible in Overview**

These stories examined in some detail are nowhere near the only passages that might be interpreted as holding positive value for queer Christians today. There are also many other stories which on the larger metaphorical sense can be interpreted as having a very positive message for contemporary queers. While one could spend entire papers and sermons developing these images, this paper will mention only a few (again in Biblical order) which hopefully will not only provide food for thought but also perhaps inspire the reader to seek out their own texts which might have particular meaning for them.

Queer people come from all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds and for that reason have sometimes encountered stemming from the lack of homogeneity in the queer community. However, queers have long known that one thing all queers have in common is the coming out process. Some authors (notably Chris Glaser) have postulated that the coming out process is itself a sacrament and could even be recognized liturgically. As a basis for this, one points to the entire book of the Exodus as Israel's coming out story. It is interesting that process which defined Israel as a nation defines queer people as a Queer nation as well. There are manifold other parallels which apply to the contemporary situation. There was a point in the history of Israel when the Israelites longed for the comforts of Egypt and complained to Moses that he had made them leave the comforts of civilization to starve in the desert (see Numbers 11:4 and 14:1-4). Coming out entails certain dangers for queer people too, as sometimes families, church positions, or even jobs can hang in the balance. In this way the security of the closet can parallel the desire to return to Egypt and the comforts of heterosexual privilege.

Other stories hold similar parallels. The Song of Solomon, easily the most erotic book of the Bible (two words that are not often used in the same sentence) is indeed an overtly heterosexual love story. Yet its subject is also a transgressive love, one that does not meet with the sanction of parents or ecclesiastical powers of the time: their love is

expressly forbidden, just as queer love is seen by some circles as transgressive yet today. Ezekiel raising up an army from scattered remnants of bones (chapter 37) or Nehemiah's rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem with a broken, humbled people can also resonate with the societal resurrection of a queer social identity. The books of the Hebrew prophets such as Amos and Hoseah offer repeated calls for justice which can speak to the queer experience. Listen to the words of Ezekiel 34:2-10 and try to see how a queer person might see them as directly applying to the contemporary Christian Church:

<sup>2</sup>"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

<sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.

<sup>4</sup>The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

<sup>5</sup>So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts.

<sup>6</sup>My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

<sup>7</sup>"Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:

<sup>8</sup>As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep;

<sup>9</sup>therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:

<sup>10</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. (*RSV*)

It's hard to miss, is it not? Habakkuk 1:2's immediate applicability is similar:

<sup>2</sup>How long, O Lord, must I call for help,  
but you do not listen?  
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"  
but you do not save? (NIV)

In the New Testament, Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan can be modernized to identify the traveller as the victim not of a robbery but of a gay-bashing (Luke 10:25-37). The refusal of those who walked by the hurt man in the parable, all members of the

religious establishment of the day, can illustrate the refusal of the contemporary Christian Church to adequately deal with the issues surrounding sexual orientation today. Jesus's call for Lazarus to come out of the tomb can be interpreted to apply especially to contemporary queers as an appeal to leave the tomb of the closet and come out themselves to a new life (John 11:1-48). Finally, all the of the New Testament passages that deal with the early Christian church's debate about whether or not to include Gentiles (whether or not one had to be circumcised, as a Jew, in order to become a Christian) can be interpreted as talking about queer people (For example, see Acts 10:28, where Peter says that "God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean" NIV). To so interpret is not an anachronism: it is a fulfillment of the radical inclusion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Three final passages deserve mention, because they are ways in which transgender images have been included in the Bible. In Ephesians 5:21-33 Christ is presented as the head of the church - but the church is female, as is evidenced by the pronouns used to describe "her" in that same passage. Thus the metaphorical image presented to us is one of a female body, the Church (of which we are all a part if one reads 1 Corinthians 12:12-27), with a male head. A clearer reference to transgender body is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Another instance comes from the earliest part of the Bible, the Creation myths. In the Book of Genesis the Hebrew word used to describe Adam before the creation of Eve is genderless. This is not in itself surprising, as there is no need for distinction. It is only after the creation of Eve that one needs to distinguish between man and woman, which Hebrew does with the words "*ish*" and "*ishah*" respectively. What is, intriguing, however, is to consider the state of this genderless individual before the creation of Eve. Did the original Adam have sexual organs? If so, what possible function could they have served? The possibility, if somewhat erudite, of a transgender individual, theoretically at least, from whom we have all descended is somewhat startling. At least, it offers a glimpse of humanity before the Fall, after which words for sexual differentiation became necessary. Finally, the Bible also offers a hint that that is the state to which we are all to return, in the end, if one believes the words of Paul in the oft-quoted Galatians 3:23: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV). One can easily add

“heterosexual and homosexual” to this dichotomous list, as queer people have just as much place in the Reign of God as does anyone else.

## V. Conclusion

The Bible is the ultimate meta-narrative, and one in which queer people can also find their experiences reflected either directly, as possibly with the stories of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and Jesus’s healing of the Centurion’s servant, or indirectly, as with the various references to eunuchs or metaphorically throughout the Bible in any story of a marginalized people. The six “clobber” passages that are so often quoted as weapons against queer individuals have received more than their fair share of attention lately. One only needs to read them in context to understand how they do not, nor were they meant to apply universally to every person and situation. As an example, try quoting Leviticus 18:22 to any lesbian: “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable” (*NIV*). In all likelihood they will wholeheartedly agree. If Leviticus 18:22 was meant to apply literally to all individuals in every circumstance, all sex with men would cease and humanity would come to an end. It is time now to move on past the debates about these six obscure passages which have been elevated to a position of artificial importance and discuss the remaining majority of the Bible, which is largely unconcerned with sexual behaviour, or, it must be conceded, may include positive role models for queer people today.

For as this paper has hopefully illustrated, there are parts of the Bible which can be interpreted as being queer-positive. This paper, however, cannot be an exhaustive list, and thus there are also other parts which potentially could have been included in this overview. This paper was also written in the hope that it might inspire readers, especially queer people who may have been turned off from Scriptural study, to do their own examination and individually search for other parts that may more accurately reflect their own lives. When doing this, one must recognize that the Bible is a dated document, and needs to be understood in the context of its time. One must sift through all the material present and decide for each passage “is this important for me? (If so, how shall it affect my life? If not, why not?)” And the method by which one can do this is simple. In one’s

study of the Bible, the Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to be just that: gospel. The word “Gospel” is originally Greek and comes from the combination of two words: “good” and “news.” This leaves two requirements for anything to be Gospel: a) it has to be good, and b) it has to be news! If one finds oneself rehearsing the same old traditional interpretations and doctrines, it might be time to at least allow some room for the Holy Spirit to do a new thing and continue to effect change in the Christian Church. If one finds oneself holding a Biblical position which is not “good” - namely, one that endorses inequality, bigotry, slavery, or homophobia, to name only a few - one needs to reconsider one’s opinion. For if the Bible is not the Good News, the question begs to be asked, what is it? That is what it needs to be, for queers as much as anyone else. And this is not a process in which only queer Christians need to engage, for their own spiritual well-being. It is also one in which all Christians need to consider, for it is only through these means that the Christian Church will finally come true to its own standard of communicating the unconditional love of God and the radical inclusiveness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the entire world.