

Editorial: Queer Theory and the Bible

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This special edition is a form of pride. It is a celebration of thirty years since the birth of queer theory. Of course, being queer, this was no normative conception or birth. More of an artificial insemination and fusion of gene pools, characterised by anarchy, activism, subversion, deconstruction, alongside identitarian and non-identitarian concerns. Queer theory transcends many disciplines. Raising suspicion from those concerned with normative ideas of scholarship, queer oscillates between delighting the academy with its offer of dense critical theory and radical undoing, yet it also disgusts traditionalists who hold allegiances to normative scholarship. With its agenda of subversion and playful parody, it is no coincidence that the term “queer theory” was first coined as a joke. Teresa de Lauretis had heard the term “queer” reclaimed on the streets by gay activists, and, as David Halperin comments, “she had the courage, and the conviction, to pair that scurrilous term with the academic holy word ‘theory.’”¹ Here, the authors of this special edition share the same courage and conviction to pair the term with biblical texts.

There is much to celebrate, then, from this disruptive, yet generative offspring. I was first drawn to queer theory because of the association of the term with LGBTQ+ issues of identity and inclusion. I quickly learnt that queer subverts identity, too, through theory-turning ideas that resound profoundly and deeply, yet also frustrate with their complexity and inability to find stability. Of course, with stability comes a sense of security and safety, a longing many LGBTQ+ people have felt and experienced in their own queer communities. Queer has helped to spotlight and critique the social constructivism of gender and identity, and, it has disturbed and disrupted the idea of power and privilege in knowledge construction. But in the course of thirty years it has also created some stabilities and sanctuaries. As we celebrate queer biblical studies, its struggles, triumphs, eyebrow-raising potency, we are indebted to the scholars who have paved the way in queer biblical studies. I am delighted that a number of these pioneers bring their experience, wisdom and insights to this special edition.

What is clear from a number of contributions (Smith, Shore-Goss, Thatcher) is the need for community. As guest editor of this special edition, I pay tribute to the

¹ David M. Halperin, “The Normalization of Queer Theory,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45:2-4 (2003), 339.

mentorship and encouragement we receive from others – in creating and establishing welcoming, affirming, constructive (and critical) communities to think and write. Personally, I have had the privilege of completing my doctoral studies under the supervision of the most marvellous Deryn Guest, whose significant contribution to queer hermeneutics reminds me constantly of the importance of the interplay between theory and identity. My work as co-director of The Shiloh Project allows me to collaborate with inspirational scholars, Caroline Blyth, Johanna Stiebert and Emily Colgan. I remain indebted to a long list of scholars, too, who have supported my endeavours to date.

Following Timothy Koch's now influential "cruising methodology," Koch's hermeneutic of cruising encourages us to engage in methods of "using our own ways of knowing, our own desire for connection, our own savvy and instinct, our own response to what attracts us and compels us."² Koch's hermeneutic is similar to a desire to seek sexual fulfilment. As this cruising methodology is applied to biblical texts, there emerges a relationship between the text and the gaze of the reader. The reader is drawn in and the text sparks something that resonates with the reader. Yet, if we pursue the sexual analogy in relation to such an identity-ideological based hermeneutic, how long until we experience the post-sex comedown? Elizabeth Stuart asks such a post-coital question: "is that it?" As she states:

The whole point about sex is that it offers only temporary satisfaction. This is why we tend to want to do it more than once. But also at its best and most satisfying it offers the promise of something beyond itself, of an ecstasy that does not fade, or a connection that does not return to the shallows.³

Queer as a verb is therefore a reflective practice, too, guided by passion, risk, wit, intuition and temporality. Yet it is a project concerned with issues of social justice. As short-lived as the satisfaction may be from engaging with biblical texts with desire and risk, the satisfaction is nonetheless there, and the fruits of the encounter do endure.

Given its enduring influence in the public sphere and contemporary culture, the Bible has the potential to justify violence against minoritized groups. Prejudiced and discriminatory hermeneutics (let's stop being polite about this abuse by calling it "conservative" or "traditional") are still actively used today, including by religious authorities. This is a form of spiritual and emotional violence. This theme is explored by Adrian Thatcher in his contribution to this edition, the first of our essays. Thatcher's article examines why Christians often fail to achieve even the minimum standard of secular morality. Thatcher draws on numerous examples of how Christian morality has

² Timothy R. Koch, "Cruising as Methodology: Homoeroticism and the Scriptures," *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, ed., Ken Stone (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 175.

³ Elizabeth Stuart, "Making No Sense: Liturgy as a Queer Space," in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Mark Jordan (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), 114.

failed, including through the maltreatment of women and sexual minorities. Traditional biblical scholarship has led to four types of violence, claims Thatcher: gender, epistemic, symbolic, and hermeneutic violence.

Holding similar concerns about the violence of homophobia, Adriaan van Klinken and Tom Muyunga-Mukasa employ a queer methodology in offering a poem as a contemporary re-telling of the gospel story about Jesus and the “woman caught in adultery” in the context of socio-political homophobia in Uganda. The poem is complemented by an autobiographical reflection by Muyunga-Mukasa, providing insight into his personal experiences of growing up as gay and religious in Uganda. This is embedded in a more general discussion, relating the poem to trends of life storytelling in African LGBTQ+ activism, and to established narrative methodologies in African theological and biblical studies scholarship by van Klinken.

Robert Shore-Goss, whose reputation in the paving of the way for the field of queer theologies and biblical studies will be well-known to readers of this journal, makes an important contribution in providing an overview of queer Jesus. In tracing decades of scholarship from various settings, Goss observes how constructions of Jesus in biblical interpretation and popular media are accused of being blasphemous fictions, while the same charge can be levied against the constructions of heteronormative and cisgender Christian churches who marginalize and stigmatize LGBTQ+ people.

While Jesus’ gender and sexuality have been disrupted in queer theologies, as Shore-Goss highlights, Will Moore explores how the God of the Hebrew Bible epitomises hegemonic masculinity, and how this is transferred to Jesus. Moore argues that these biblical divine masculinities disturb dominant constructions of gender in the ancient world and that followers of Christianity might be called to do the same.

In her essay, “‘A Big, Fabulous Bible’: *The Queen James Bible* and its Queering of Scripture,” Shannon Constantine explores the activist potential of the Queen James Bible, noting the disruptive strategies used to subvert the authority of canonical biblical texts and the role of ethics in the process of translation. *The Queen James Bible* identifies itself as attempting to “resolve interpretive ambiguity in the Bible as it pertains to homosexuality,” and is based on the King James Version.

Eric Smith’s essay “Queerer Meals: Paul and Communal Anti-Norms in Corinth” explores how 1 Corinthians 11:17-32 is a text in which Paul urges that the Corinthian assembly should practise queerer meals, characterized by inclusion, generosity, deference, and egalitarian community. Smith argues how the space of meals becomes an important site of community, where norms are subverted and deviance (by the reckoning of the broader culture) becomes normalized and indeed valorised.

Concluding this special edition is a superlative article from Stephen Moore who seeks to escape the queer theoretical snares of Butler or Foucault, and travels down a less-beaten track in a Deleuzoguattarian reading of the Gospel of Mark. It is a treasure.

Here's to the next ten years of queering biblical studies! Happy Birthday!

Bibliography

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