

# Gender and Sexuality

Queer Theology - A Brief

Overview

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After spending nearly 20 years in churches that preached a Bible message which insisted I must become straight and masculine in order to please God, I had to take matters into my own hands and discover for myself meaning from the scriptures.

I consider Queer Theology as falling into two distinct types—defensive theology and affirming theology. It is easy to get caught up in the first. When people use the Bible to attack us and malign us, then we feel we must defend ourselves. Opponents of LGBTQ people typically draw from a handful of no more than six short passages taken out of context in order to condemn us. Much Queer Theology has been designed to counteract these arguments.

Probably the two biggest verses used against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who pursue same- gender love, are the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, and the opening statements attributed to Paul in Romans chapter one. One of the tools LGBTQ theologians use is simply to look at the passages in context.

Of course we must recognise that there are multiple ways to interpret a Bible story. We need to go with open hands and not cling to any single interpretation when others are possible. Even this open-handed approach is queer to me (in the broader sense of the word). It is also very Jewish, drawing from the Rabbinical tradition of multiple interpretations. Compare this to the rigid mono-interpretations that get handed down from the Church in Christian traditions, and which leave no room for questions or alternative readings.

While a lot of time has been spent on defensive theology, I find it far more interesting to engage in Affirming Theology. Lots of folks have scoured the Bible in search of gay and lesbian characters. Some talk about David and Jonathon as being gay lovers. I admit at times that the speculation on who might be same-gender loving Bible buddies grows thin as we stretch stories to fit into our modern understandings of sexual orientation.

I have had the most success when I have looked at the bodies and behaviors of Bible characters in terms of gender and gender differences. The Bible has many gender and sexual minorities

clearly drawn; we need not speculate. For one, there are many stories of eunuchs. These castrated males typically do not experience male puberty, so they maintain their high voices and do not develop the body hair, facial hair, and muscles that come with testosterone. Often they are presented as single and childless, perhaps the queerest identity of them all for an adult male in the ancient world.

Just visit the Book of Esther to see 12 different eunuchs running the court and propelling the plot forward. Simply telling the story of Esther so that it is eunuch-inclusive re-focusses it so that we see the gender and sexual minorities already highlighted in the text.

Many sermons have been preached about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8- usually with the focus on Jesus or Phillip, but rarely on the eunuch and the eunuch's body and life experiences. It is extraordinary that the first baptism of the early church is of a Black, African, surgically-altered, gender-variant, rich, literate court official, who is also a person of faith. Look at the intersections in this one person: they reveal a radically open church which makes room for all sorts of bodies and people.

Many people do not realise that there is another Ethiopian eunuch in the Bible- in Jeremiah 38. What is stunning about this story is that we see an outsider in the court of Israel, an Ethiopian who is also a gender and sexual minority. Unlike the character in Acts 8, this one has a name, Ebed Melech, and this one does the saving. Ebed Melech rescues the prophet Jeremiah from a deep hole of a prison cell.

In addition to eunuchs, we can find gender outlaws in the Bible- those people who do not fit into traditional gender roles or presentations. Among these are Deborah in Judges 4 and 5 and the curious character of the "man carrying a pitcher of water," an act typically reserved for women and children. This nameless man appears in Mark 14:13, Luke 22:10, and is referenced in Matthew 16:18 as "a certain man" without the detail of the unconventional behaviour of water carrying.

Perhaps for me the most moving story of gender variance in a Bible story is the narrative that includes Jacob, Esau, and Joseph. Such a moving tale, especially when you dig into the Hebrew language and discover that the Coat of Many Colours

Jacob gives to Joseph is the same word for the dress Tamar wears in 2 Samuel 13. Both garments get destroyed, both characters come from large blended families, and both experience violence at the hands of brothers. If we read the story of Joseph as one where the character wears a transgressive female garment, how does this change the story?

For me, Queer Theology requires going to the text with imagination- not to make stuff up, but rather to see what is already hidden right in front of our eyes. We have been trained to look away from gender and sexual minorities in the world and in the text. The job of the theologian is to look deeper.

For further reading see the Gender and Sexuality reading list.

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