



PROF. ROBERT GAGNON'S RESPONSE TO
ERIC THURMAN'S REVIEW IN
REVIEW OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE:
ON PAYING ATTENTION TO PAUL'S REASONS FOR
REJECTING HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE

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The editor of *Review of Biblical Literature*, Marvin Sweeney, perhaps in conjunction with one or more board members of *RBL*, authorized as reviewers of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* two persons whose views could not be further from those expressed in my book. (Note to readers: *Review of Biblical Literature* posts online reviews by scholars who belong to the Society of Biblical Literature. A selection of these reviews is printed each year in a print edition of *Review of Biblical Literature*.) One of these reviewers is Eric Thurman, a doctoral student at Drew University working under the radical postmodernist New Testament scholar Stephen Moore. His review appears online at http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1798_765.pdf and was published in the print edition of *Review of Biblical Literature 2003* (ed. Marvin A. Sweeney; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 137-40. The other reviewer, James David Hester Amador, shares a similar theological perspective to Thurman. One of his main interests is the "intersexed." He will be treated separately in a forthcoming piece on my website, www.robagnon.net.

Thurman is only a doctoral student and so some of his deficiencies as a reviewer perhaps can be attributed to his inexperience as a scholar. Nevertheless, his review constitutes a textbook example of how not to write a review. In the discussion below I will treat: (1) Thurman's false statements regarding my book; (2) Thurman's unsustainable conclusions about Scripture and homosexuality; and (3) Thurman's decision to adopt an *ad hominem* approach in lieu of substantive arguments. This last section raises questions about bias and propriety on the part of the editor and/or editorial staff at *RBL*.

A deficiency in Thurman's review that can be noted at the outset is that Thurman devotes only a grand total of four sentences (11 lines) to describing the five chapters of my book that exclude the introduction and conclusion. He then launches immediately into criticizing the book's alleged "problems." A more threadbare description of a book with 460 pages of text I cannot imagine for a full-length review. It certainly symbolizes, and perhaps underscores, Thurman's disinclination to give a careful and fair reading of the book.

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I. False Statements Made by Thurman

A. Orientation theory, ancient and modern: The difference between collapsing differences and showing that the differences are neither great nor relevant. As regards sexual orientation, Thurman claims that I “collapse the differences” between Paul and the modern world. This is false. I do not “collapse the differences” but rather show, through detailed discussion of ancient sources, that the differences are not as significant as people like Thurman propose and, in the end, would not have made a difference to Paul’s argument. Thurman does not engage these sources or show how I have misread them—which is precisely what he would have to do in order to demonstrate that I have “collapsed” the differences. Not even two pro-homosex biblical scholars, Bernadette Brooten and William Schoedel, argue that the notion of “orientation” would have made any difference to Paul. Indeed, they acknowledge that he may have been aware of something akin to sexual orientation. Thurman appears to be oblivious to these things, despite the fact that the evidence is clearly laid out on pp. 380-95 of my book. Further documentation of this point can be found in my new article, “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?” in *Christian Sexuality* (ed. R. Saltzman; Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003), 106-55 (especially pp. 140-52, a section entitled “Why the Sexual Orientation Argument Doesn’t Work”).

B. Who is abstracting statements from context? Thurman claims that Gagnon “abstracts what biblical writers say from their conceptual contexts” (this is the **third** of four “problems” with my book alleged by Thurman). This is false. I lay out in great detail what the “conceptual context” was for biblical texts, both in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world. And I show how biblical authors both drew from, and qualified, such contexts. I have amassed more documentation here than any other biblical scholar so for Thurman to claim that I have abstracted biblical texts from these contexts is absurd. In making this false claim Thurman, as a reviewer, ironically abstracts my observations from their context of strong supporting documentation. In addition, Thurman abstracts Paul’s remarks on same-sex intercourse from their context by showing insensitivity to the differences between Paul’s views on same-sex intercourse and the views that prevailed in the Greco-Roman pagan world.

C. To impose on Paul or not to impose on Paul: that is Thurman’s dilemma. Thurman claims that I “impose an entire ideological apparatus on contemporary homoerotic practices” in saying that the biblical text gives us some guidance on coupling gender and sexuality. This is false. Like every other criticism in the review Thurman gives not a single concrete example from my book to document his assertion.

The great irony is Thurman, while objecting to my alleged imposition of an “entire ideological apparatus” on Paul, insists that scholars should indeed impose meaning on Paul. In fact, he goes so far as to say that Paul’s own “conscious intentions” should not be “privileged.” So he criticizes me for allegedly doing what he complains that I don’t do—i.e., imposing ideology on Paul. Go figure.

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Thurman claims that I ignore “two decades of critique of biblical authority by feminist and other ideological critics”.... As it is, I do not ignore radical feminist critiques.... I disagree with such critiques and give my reasons for disagreeing.

D. Beating a cardboard dummy: Thurman's portrayal of Paul the misogynist. Thurman misconstrues a hermeneutical argument that I make on p. 346. There I contend:

To overturn such a clear biblical mandate [against homosexual practice] requires strong and unambiguous counter-arguments. Furthermore, one must demonstrate that the new information being brought to bear addresses directly the reasons for the Bible's position. For example, it is not enough to prove that the primary expression of homosexuality in antiquity was an inherently exploitative form (pederasty) or that modern science has demonstrated that homosexuality is primarily a genetic phenomenon (two dubious claims, as we shall see). One must also prove that the Bible condemned homosexuality *primarily* on the grounds that homosexuality was a willfully chosen rejection of God's design for sexuality. Otherwise, even if one's point were valid it would still have little relevance for ascertaining the deficiencies in the Bible's reasons for condemning homosexual behavior.

This seems to be an eminently reasonable point. If one wants to repudiate Scripture's stance on same-sex intercourse, one has to repudiate the basis for Scripture's stance.

Thurman, however, charges that this position—namely, that critique of the biblical position must be targeted to the reasons for the Bible's position—is, of all things, “intellectually irresponsible.” Why? Thurman claims that I ignore “two decades of critique of biblical authority by feminist and other ideological critics” (this is the **second** alleged “problem” with my book). As it is, I do not *ignore* radical feminist critiques, such as the one put forward by Bernadette Brooten, that the Bible's opposition to homoerotic behavior is, in the first instance, based on misogyny—the desire to keep women “down” both literally and figuratively. I *disagree* with such critiques and give my reasons for disagreeing with them on pp. 361-80 (see also pp. 138-46). Thurman makes no attempt to refute any of my points.

Based on Thurman's remarks alone, a reader would never guess that my book addresses numerous content-criticism arguments and even states explicitly that biblical authors can be subject to content criticism. In the very paragraph immediately preceding the one quoted by Thurman, I state clearly: “I believe that criticism of Scripture and of the contemporary worldview is a two-way street. I cannot be a biblical literalist or fundamentalist and still retain intellectual integrity” (p. 345). But I go on to say that Scripture cannot be reduced to a merely equal partner in the dialogue—at least not if it is to function for the church as Scripture, that is, as the highest authority in matters of faith and practice. “For me the Bible is the normative ‘playing field’ for grappling with matters of faith and practice. Experience is also important, but no experience is self-interpreting or self-validating.” Moreover, I assert that when the biblical position is pervasive, strong, absolute, and countercultural, the burden of proof lies entirely with those self-professed Christians who want to discount that witness.

Thurman misses the obvious point that, if he wants to charge Paul with misogyny, the burden of proof is on him to prove that Paul opposed homosexual behavior first and foremost because it threatened to undermine male dominance over women. Otherwise, the charge is quite beside the point. If, as I argue, Paul was predominantly motivated by concerns for sexual complementarity and differentiation—a deeper level than status distinctions in gender roles—then Thurman's charge stereotypes unfairly the actual basis for

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Paul's opposition to homosexual practice. Quite simply, one has to target the criticism to the suppositions of the author, to the extent that these suppositions can be recovered. Otherwise, one is not critiquing the author but simply one's own cardboard dummy of what one would like the author to be. This doesn't mean that the author cannot be criticized for what s/he believes (true content criticism). It just means that one has to make the connection between one's critique and the author's own reasoning.

So it is not enough to say, as Thurman does, that Paul's views "are fully at home" in a misogynistic symbolic universe and then to detach Paul's motivations for making his remarks from the remarks themselves. For, in fact, apart from having some inkling of the reasons behind Paul's critique, Thurman cannot even begin to talk about Paul's views. Indeed, to the extent that Thurman disregards Paul's own rationale, the name "Paul" in his handling becomes little more than a cipher for "the distorted Paul of Eric Thurman's own biases that has little or no connection to the real Paul of history." Now, beating on the latter may be a treat for Thurman and a small circle of likeminded friends as part of a mental gymnastics exercise: "What if Paul were really as big a misogynist as I, Eric Thurman, would like him to be so that I can cavalierly dismiss his views on same-sex intercourse?" However, I suspect that most Christian scholars who take Scripture seriously do not think that reading such ideologically-driven, antihistorical speculations makes for the best use of their limited time.

The bottom line is that Thurman's position here is, *at best*, reductionistic. In effect, to maintain his position he is forced to argue that since ancient Jews and Christians were the most staunchly opposed to same-sex intercourse in the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin, and since, allegedly, this opposition was essentially motivated by misogyny, then the writers of Scripture were among the biggest misogynists of their day. And he would have to include Jesus since he undoubtedly shared this view. But, of course, this conclusion is absurd. In fact, some of the least misogynistic arguments of Paul's day, outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, are those that speak negatively about same-sex intercourse.

II. Unsustainable Conclusions Made by Thurman

A. On the terms "homosexuality" and "homosexual." It is a good sign that when a reviewer focuses on a trite point about "the glaringly anachronistic use of the terms 'homosexuality' and 'homosexual,'" as Thurman does, the reviewer is short of substantive criticisms (the alleged **first** "problem" with my book). Everyone uses the terms—on both sides of the debate—and does so for the sake of convenience (Scroggs, Nissinen, Brooten, etc.). Moreover, contrary to what Thurman charges, I do not use the term "homosexuality" interchangeably with "same-sex erotic practices" "throughout the book." I generally distinguish these two things. Indeed, I repeatedly make the point that Scripture focuses on homosexual practice but does so in a way that takes in (not ignores) persons with biologically related, exclusive homoerotic desire. For example, in the "Introduction" I note:

The focus of this book on *same-sex intercourse* or *homosexual practice*, as opposed to homosexual *orientation*, is a reflection of the Bible's own relative disinterest toward motives or the origination of same-sex impulses. What matters

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is not what urges individuals feel but what they do with these urges, both in their fantasy life and in their concrete actions. (p. 38)

And what is Thurman suggesting? Does Thurman think that claims to a “sexual orientation” mandate an end to all structural prerequisites for valid sexual unions? That incest or adult-child sex or multiple-partner sexual unions would be acceptable if a person could claim an “orientation” toward such behavior? Thurman needs to get over his love affair with the concept of “sexual orientation”—a concept that means little more than the directedness of sexual desire at any given period in a person’s life. If, as I show, Scripture opposes same-sex intercourse on the grounds that it is a wrongheaded attempt at sexual completion through merging with a sexual same, what difference does an orientation make?

As noted in I.A. above, my book treats at length the problems with characterizing “homosexual orientation” as a purely modern concept. Thurman *assumes* that modern notions of homosexual orientation create “a significant epistemological gap between ancient and modern constructions of sex practices” and then blames me for not “investigating” (i.e., agreeing with) this point. Yet my investigation shows that there is no “epistemological gap” significant enough or relevant enough to warrant overriding the core biblical stance on an other-sex prerequisite. The problem lies with Thurman’s faulty assumption, not with any lack of investigation on my part.

B. The crime of “privileging Paul’s intent.” Thurman says: “By isolating and privileging Paul’s intent, Gagnon has obscured this ideological dimension [viz., regarding ‘female inferiority’] in Paul’s discourse.” The statement is nonsensical. One cannot get at the “ideological dimension” of Paul’s thought apart from asking questions about Paul’s reasons for taking one position or another. That is part of his “ideology.” Thurman also assumes that at no point can Paul (or Jesus) be countercultural in his remarks, when clearly on many occasions, including some elements of his view of women, he was. (Incidentally, I am well aware of the views of his mentor, Stephen Moore, which Thurman cites as a counterweight to my views. Thurman might at least have read and responded to my critique of Moore’s article on Romans 1 in my book [pp. 362-64].) Thurman seems unaware of the fact that, had Paul been naively imbibing at the cultural well of the Greco-Roman world, he would have allowed for some forms of same-sex intercourse—certainly on the part of men who wanted to be penetrators—rather than adopting a total ban.

C. Why the sexes cannot be detached from sexuality. The only time in the entire review that I see Thurman beginning to develop a lucid point—though he doesn’t have the arguments to carry it through—is when he states:

Even if Paul . . . imagined male-male sex as simply a violation of gender boundaries . . . , this model of same-sex intercourse . . . does not easily map onto today’s understandings of sexuality, which precisely detach one’s erotic investments from questions of one’s gender (non)conformity.

Of course, so far as Paul’s views are concerned, the issue is not just “one’s gender (non)conformity” but also sex or gender per se, both one’s own and that of one’s partner. With this correction of Thurman’s assertion in place, the problem with it is that it as-

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sumes as fact a single view of “today’s understandings of sexuality”—not surprisingly, the one that Thurman himself holds. What Thurman should have said is: Paul’s “understanding of sexuality does not map easily into *my* understanding of sexuality.”

In other words, Thurman contends that we now know that the sexes of the two erotically-joined partners should have little significance because we now know, allegedly, that sexuality is socially constructed and has little-if-any intrinsic connection to a person’s sex. I recommend that Thurman read the section in my book on the differences between male and female homosexuality. Homosexual relationships serve as the ideal laboratory for confirming that men and women maintain crucial sexual distinctions even when acting in some nonconformist manners. Apparently, individuals can only go so far in reconstructing their sexuality. Another irony: Why do most homosexuals (at least male homosexuals) claim to be *exclusively* attracted to persons of the *same sex* if sexuality is so easily disentangled from sex? I mean, what is it about a person’s sex that leads many homosexuals to be attracted only to persons of the same sex rather than, say, gender nonconformists of the opposite sex? Such persons are certainly not detaching sexuality from sex. Thurman appears to be oblivious to such considerations.

III. Thurman’s *Ad Hominem* Style and the Questionable Role of *RBL*

A. Thurman’s *ad hominem* style. Thurman’s review of my book is characterized by a series of nasty *ad hominem* attacks. These include: (a) Gagnon’s book is “a regrettable expression of conservative backlash”; (b) “Gagnon’s anachronism becomes ideological mystification”; (c) Gagnon’s “statements are intellectually irresponsible at best”; (d) Gagnon “deigns to them [homosexuals]”; and (e) Gagnon exhibits “disingenuous posturing.” These remarks are not just of the quality: I disagree with Gagnon’s conclusions for the following reasons. They go far beyond that into character assassination. Apparently Thurman hoped that an *ad hominem* approach would provide cover for his inability to supply a substantive critique. For not once in his review does he give concrete evidence that my exegetical or hermeneutical conclusions are wrong.

In this abusive context it is surely ironic that Thurman gripes about my “disingenuous,” “defensive” posturing when I talk at the beginning of my book about “coming out” as a scholar critical of homosexual practice and predict the abuse to come (this is the **fourth** alleged “problem” with my book, according to Thurman). There are numerous venues today, including hiring in our guild, where discrimination is suffered not by homosexuals but by those who respectfully and compassionately write against supporting cultural incentives for homoerotic activity. That Thurman pretends not to know this speaks volumes about the integrity, or lack thereof, of his review. With respect to Thurman’s *ad hominem* style and dearth of substantive critique, it is my hope that Mr. Thurman will grow in maturity of argumentation as he progresses in his academic career.

B. The questionable role of Review of Biblical Literature. Then there is the question of fairness and propriety on the part of the authorities at *Review of Biblical Literature*. It is rare, if not unheard of, to authorize a book to be reviewed solely by two persons who start from the same position of diametrical opposition to the book’s thesis. The reason why it is rare is obvious: The book is not likely to get a fair review. For example, in *RBL* or its

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print companion, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, the work of feminists, postmodernists, and pro-homosex scholars is usually reviewed by scholars sympathetic to their views.

Did either Marvin Sweeney, editor of *RBL*, or one of *RBL*'s board members solicit the two reviewers? If one or the other did, then suspicions are raised as regards intent to get a negative review. It seems that *RBL* solicited at least Hester (Amador) for a review of my book. In two separate e-mail correspondences sent to me on Dec. 28, 2001, Hester wrote: "I have been asked to review your book by the editors of *Review of Biblical Literature*"; and "I have no earthly idea why I was asked to review it for *RBL*." He describes himself in his online *curriculum vitae* as co-director of the *New Testament Rhetoric Project* at the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity in Claremont, Calif. Sweeney teaches at The Claremont Graduate School. As for Thurman, I do not know whether he volunteered to review my book and *RBL* approved or *RBL* solicited a review from him.

I wrote to Sweeney, requesting an opportunity to respond to Thurman's review and noting the appearance of impropriety in assigning the review to two overtly hostile persons. Sweeney denied that he or anyone else had "conspired" to commission a negative review of my book. But I had not charged anyone with "conspiracy." Nor had I declared outright that a "deliberate" attempt had been made to get negative reviews.

To quote the philosophy of Thurman and other extreme postmodernist or "queer" readings, Sweeney wrongly "privileges conscious intent." Again, to invoke Thurman's principles (which Sweeney told me were credible), *RBL*'s actions in authorizing two overtly hostile reviewers of my book were "fully at home in the symbolic universe" of an academy generally hostile to any questioning of pro-homosex assumptions. Even in the absence of deliberate intent, the outcome would necessitate—to avoid even the appearance of unfairness—either an attempt at soliciting another review from a more sympathetic source or toning down the submitted reviews. Even if the unfairness were inadvertent, it would still be unfairness in need of rectification. In short, it does not matter whether the powers-that-be at *RBL* had malicious intent or were simply insensitive. The results are the same—imbalanced and unfair reviews. "Conspiracy" is irrelevant. Several people, or even just the chief editor, can make decisions that are driven by ideologies and biases. Ultimately it matters little whether one or more persons at *RBL* acted deliberately or out of unconscious insensitivity, whether there was a conspiracy or a single person acted unilaterally out of certain biases.

As it was, rather than take steps to correct the imbalance, Sweeney went ahead and published Thurman's online review in the print edition of *Review of Biblical Literature*. Particularly revealing is Sweeney's insistence to me that Thurman "has not engaged in an *ad hominem* attack against your work." Frankly, it is hard to believe that, if I had written the same things to Sweeney that Thurman had written about me, Sweeney would not have viewed it as a personal attack:

Your disingenuous posturing, your intellectually irresponsible statements, your ideologically muddled views, and your condescending attitude make your latest response to me a regrettable expression of reactionary backlash.

One would expect that Marvin Sweeney would readily perceive such remarks, when directed at himself, as crossing the line from scholarly disagreement to character assassination. Yet he appears incapable of such recognition when the remarks are directed at a scholar whose views and convictions differ markedly from his own. Despite

Sweeney's "assurance" to me that such remarks do not constitute an unprofessional personal attack, I trust that evenhanded or impartial observers will grasp that these caustic expressions are not dispassionate, charitable, and fair-minded evaluative comments. They are part of a high-pitched rhetoric designed to mask the absence of substantive arguments.

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