

Does Jack Rogers's Book "Explode the Myths" about the Bible and Homosexuality and "Heal the Church"?

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Westminster John Knox Press has recently published a book by Jack Rogers, a former moderator of the PCUSA and professor of theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary, entitled *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (2006). **The key question is: Does the book accomplish either goal?**

By "explode the myths" Rogers means that "neither the Bible nor the confessions, properly understood, is opposed to homosexuality as such. . . . [W]e see clearly that Jesus and the Bible, properly understood, do not condemn people who are homosexual" (p. 126). Rogers is quite emphatic that he knows what the biblical text says about homosexual practice: "Most Christians have been told at one time or another that the Bible condemns all homosexual relationships. That view is simply incorrect" (p. 70). Rogers does not say that he thinks that this view is incorrect or that it is likely to be incorrect; for a fact it is incorrect, Rogers say.

Now there is a bit of a problem here. **Rogers acknowledges in his preface that "he has not specialized as a biblical scholar" (p. ix). This acknowledgement is demonstrated throughout his discussion of biblical texts. For example:**

- **Rogers's work with Scripture is entirely derivative.** At least so far as his views of Scripture are concerned, it is difficult to find any original analysis. What few ventures Rogers makes would probably better have been left undone since they are based on poor knowledge of literary and historical context matters or on poor logic. He relies heavily on a very limited selection of biblical scholars for his views, chiefly Victor Furnish, Martti Nissinen, Phyllis Bird, and Dale Martin.
- **Rogers uses even this small selection of secondary literature very selectively. When they make statements or come to conclusions inconvenient to Rogers's conclusions, he doesn't alert readers.** This is dishonest. To give two short examples among many:
 - **Phyllis Bird** has done extensive work on the *qedeshim*, cult figures mentioned in Deut 23:17-18 and throughout the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua-2 Kings) who sometimes served as consensually receptive

partners in male-male intercourse. Even Bird admits (see too my analysis in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 100-110) that the vehement Deuteronomistic stance against these figures primarily has in view “the repugnant associations with male homosexual activity” (Bird 1997, 75). This admission makes clear that the Deuteronomistic Historian would have viewed the story of the Levite at Gibeah in Judg 19:22-25 as an indictment of all forms of male-male intercourse, not just coercive forms. Since this story is a virtual carbon copy of the story of Sodom in Gen 19:1-10—in effect, the earliest commentary—it provides strong evidence that the author of Gen 19:1-10 likewise intended an indictment of all male-male intercourse. Not only does Rogers not comment on this, he nowhere even mentions the phenomenon of the *qedeshim* or their relevance to the homosexuality issue.

- In one of his more candid moments, **Martti Nissinen** acknowledges: “Paul does not mention *tribades* or *kinaidoi*, that is, female and male persons who were habitually involved in homoerotic relationships, but if he knew about them (and there is every reason to believe that he did), it is difficult to think that, because of their apparent ‘orientation,’ he would *not* have included them in Romans 1:24-27. . . . For him, there is no individual inversion or inclination that would make this conduct less culpable. . . . Presumably nothing would have made Paul approve homoerotic behavior” (*Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* [Fortress, 1998], 109-12). This conclusion, along with Bird’s, runs directly counter to Jack Rogers’s main thesis that there are no biblical texts that are opposed to same-sex intercourse *per se*.
- **Many of the most important scholars who have written on the biblical witness regarding homosexual behavior and are fully supportive of homosexual unions are completely ignored by Rogers.** These include Bernadette Brooten (a lesbian New Testament scholar who taught at Harvard Divinity School and currently teaches at Brandeis), William Schoedel (professor emeritus of classics from the University of Illinois), and Robin Scroggs (who was professor of New Testament at Union Seminary in New York). In some instances, this may be attributed to the fact that Rogers simply has not done his homework. However, in other instances **one wonders whether it is because some of them arrive at conclusions inconvenient to Rogers’s views. For example:**
 - **Bernadette Brooten** has written the most important book on lesbianism in antiquity and its relation to early Christianity (especially Rom 1:26), at least from a pro-homosex perspective. She admits that neither committed homosexual unions nor knowledge of homosexual orientation would have made any difference to Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice (*Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* [University of Chicago Press, 1996]). She criticized both John Boswell and Robin Scroggs for their exploitation argument:

Boswell . . . argued that . . . “The early Christian church does not appear to have opposed homosexual behavior per se.” The sources on female homoeroticism that I present in this book run absolutely counter to [this conclusion]. (p. 11)

If . . . the dehumanizing aspects of pederasty motivated Paul to condemn sexual relations between males, then why did he condemn relations between females in the same sentence? . . . Rom 1:27, like Lev 18:22 and 20:13, condemns all males in male-male relationships regardless of age, making it unlikely that lack of mutuality or concern for the passive boy were Paul’s central concerns. . . . The ancient sources, which rarely speak of sexual relations between women and girls, undermine Robin Scroggs’s theory that Paul opposed homosexuality as pederasty. (pp. 253 n. 106, 257, 361)

She also criticized the use of an orientation argument:

Paul could have believed that *tribades*, the ancient *kinaidoi*, and other sexually unorthodox persons were born that way and yet still condemn them as unnatural and shameful. . . . I believe that Paul used the word “exchanged” to indicate that people knew the natural sexual order of the universe and left it behind. . . . I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God. (p. 244)

And she mounts a very strong argument against those who claim that Rom 1:26 does not refer to lesbian intercourse (pp. 248-52; see also my discussion in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 297-99). This is important for two reasons: (1) Rogers raises a question of whether Rom 1:26 even refers to such (p. 78, relying on Nissinen); and (2) since lesbianism was *not* known in the ancient world for being conducted in a particularly exploitative way (i.e., with boys, slaves, or prostitutes), an indictment by Paul of female-female intercourse would be strong evidence that Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice was absolute, no exceptions for non-exploitative conduct. Rogers fails to mention even a single argument for the identification of Rom 1:26 with lesbian intercourse, let alone respond to such arguments or recognize their import for his overall thesis.

- **William Schoedel** has made similar points in his significant article “Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition” (in D. Balch, *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*). Although writing an article overall supportive of committed homosexual unions, Schoedel (like Brooten) admits that neither the exploitation argument nor the orientation argument is without serious problems. On the matter of pederasty, Schoedel intimates that in the Greco-Roman world homosexual intercourse between an adult male and a male youth was regarded as a *less* exploitative form of same-sex *eros* than intercourse between two adult

males. The key problem with homosexual intercourse—behaving toward the passive male partner as if the latter were female—was exacerbated when the intercourse was aimed at adult males who had outgrown the “softness” of immature adolescence. Schoedel’s comment on Philo of Alexandria is apt:

Philo adds something new in this connection when he rejects the love of males with males even though they “only” differ in age ([*Cont. Life*,] 59). The “only” is important here. For the difference in age made all the difference in the Greco-Roman view. Philo is subtly suggesting that the normal abhorrence for the love of adult males can with equal propriety be extended to pederasty. (p. 50)

Schoedel states that “some support” exists in Philo, *Abraham* 135 for thinking that Paul might be speaking in Rom 1:26-27 “only of same-sex acts performed by those who are by nature heterosexual.” But he then dismisses the suggestion:

But such a phenomenon does not excuse some other form of same-sex eros in the mind of a person like Philo. Moreover, we would expect Paul to make that form of the argument more explicit if he intended it. . . . Paul’s wholesale attack on Greco-Roman culture makes better sense if, like Josephus and Philo, he lumps all forms of same-sex eros together as a mark of Gentile decadence. (pp. 67-68)

Schoedel also acknowledges that a “conception of a psychological disorder socially engendered or reinforced *and genetically transmitted* may be presupposed” for Philo (p. 56 [emphasis added]; see also my short review and critique of Schoedel in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 392-94).

- Other scholars supportive of homosexual unions could be cited against Rogers’s overall conclusions. For instance, **Louis Crompton** in the massive *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Harvard University Press, 2003) has written:

According to [one] interpretation, Paul’s words were not directed at “bona fide” homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian. (p. 114)

Even **Walter Wink**, in his generally mean-spirited review of my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, had to admit:

Gagnon exegetes every biblical text even remotely relevant to the theme [of homosexual practice]. This section is filled with exegetical insights. I have long insisted that the issue is one of hermeneutics, and

that efforts to twist the text to mean what it clearly does not say are deplorable. Simply put, the Bible is negative toward same-sex behavior, and there is no getting around it. . . . Gagnon imagines a request from the Corinthians to Paul for advice, based on 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 [on how to respond to a man in a loving and committed union with another man]. “. . . . When you mentioned that *arsenokoitai* would be excluded from the coming kingdom of God, you were not including somebody like this man, were you?” . . . No, Paul wouldn't accept that relationship for a minute. (“To Hell with Gays?” *Christian Century* 119:13 [June 5-12, 2002]: 32-33; see my response to Wink's review: “Gays and the Bible,” *Christian Century* 119.7 [Aug. 14-27, 2002]: 40-43, with fuller version on my website www.robgnon.net)

Dan O. Via (professor emeritus of New Testament at Duke University Divinity School) also acknowledges in his response to my essay in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* that the Bible's rule against homosexual practice is “an absolute prohibition” that condemns homosexual practice “unconditionally” and “absolute[ly]” (pp. 93-95). This is an interesting admission in view of the fact that he had charged me in his own essay in *Two Views* with “absolutizing . . . the biblical prohibition of all same-sex intercourse” (p. 27). What does it mean to “absolutize” an already absolute biblical prohibition? At any rate, he acknowledges in his more lucid moments the absoluteness of biblical opposition to homosexual practice. In his essay in *Two Views* he rightly notes:

The Pauline texts . . . do not support this limitation of male homosexuality to pederasty. Moreover, some Greek sources suggest that—at least in principle—a relationship should not be begun until the boy is almost grown and should be lifelong. . . . I believe that Hays is correct in holding that *arsenokoites* [in 1 Cor 6:9] refers to a man who engages in same-sex intercourse. . . . True the meaning of a compound word does not necessarily add up to the sum of its parts (Martin 119). But in this case I believe the evidence suggests that it does. . . . First Cor[inthians] 6:9-10 simply classifies homosexuality as a moral sin that finally keeps one out of the kingdom of God. (pp. 11, 13)

To be continued in Installment 2 ([html](#) or [pdf](#))