

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

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[Continued from Installment 1: [html](#) or [pdf](#)]

So one can readily see that **Rogers tends to avoid remarks from scholars who agree with his overall stance regarding support for homosexual unions but who also disagree with his central conclusion that "the Bible [does not] condemn all homosexual relationships"** (p. 70). One can understand why: Such literature seriously undermines the appearance that Rogers wants to give; namely, that there is a united front among pro-homosex scholars regarding the assertion that "the Bible does not condemn all homosexual relationships." In fact, the majority of the best pro-homosex scholars acknowledge the precise opposite: Scripture does condemn all homosexual relationships. In not letting readers know this, Rogers is not acting as an honest scholar.

It is also **in stark contrast to his eagerness to let readers know when scholars who are not affirming of homosexual practice agree with the way that Rogers wants to interpret a given text.** For example, Rogers is eager to cite Marion Soards and Richard Hays, two scholars who do not endorse homosexual practice, when their views on particular scripture texts match what Rogers would like to hear. (Note that both Soards and Hays wrote their works *before* any of my work was published.) Rogers's style of only citing scholars who agree with his overall position when they also agree with him in particulars is in contrast to my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. There I cited disagreements on the interpretation of particular texts not only by pro-homosex scholars but also by scholars disapproving of homosexual practice (e.g., my reference to Hays on the Sodom narrative, p. 71 n. 74). I then show why I think both the former and the latter have erred.

Postscript on Prof. Soards: Since on a couple of occasions Rogers cites Marion Soards' work *Scripture & Homosexuality* (Westminster John Knox, 1995) to dismiss the relevance of certain biblical texts (specifically, the Levitical prohibitions and 1 Cor 6:9), I took the liberty of writing Prof. Soards (who teaches at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary) to ask him whether he had changed his views on these texts in the light of what I have published since 2001.

Soards responded on 6/10/2006 with an email that he has kindly permitted me to print here:

More than before I am persuaded that all the biblical texts are relevant to the discussion of contemporary same-sex relations. . . .

The OT texts seem to me to state a perspective that the NT texts affirm, thus, giving a consistent and persuasive biblical witness with regard to homosexual activity. Scripture consistently denounces such behavior and there is no way to read the biblical witness—expressed in a wide variety of texts in a wide variety of ways—as condoning homosexual activity. For me, even texts that are not primarily commenting on homosexual behavior—rather referring to it in relation to another point that is being made—are negative toward homosexual activity and are to be understood as such for contemporary reflection on the subject.

Rogers does not seem to read my intentions with clarity—perhaps because I expressed myself in less than clear ways—but if anything I am more than ever persuaded of the relevance of the range of OT/NT texts for the current discussion of homosexual behavior. Actually to put it succinctly, I find your own analysis/exegesis persuasive.

So much for Rogers's use of Marion Soards's work to buttress any of his own views.

- **Rogers doesn't even recognize that the two main arguments that he employs to establish his central contention about the Bible not condemning all homosexual relationships—the exploitation argument and the misogyny argument—are mutually exclusive. Indeed, one of the two—the misogyny argument—actually contradicts this contention.** The exploitation argument assumes that Scripture's authors were criticizing only particularly exploitative homosexual unions (those involving boys, slaves, or prostitutes), not caring and committed homosexual unions. This is an argument which asserts that the biblical prohibitions of same-sex intercourse were not intended to be absolute. The misogyny argument, however, asserts the opposite; namely, that the biblical prohibitions of homosexual practice were intended to be absolute. Rogers repeatedly stresses the desire to keep women oppressed in a subordinate position as the impetus for Scripture's opposing homosexual unions. If this were indeed the motive, as Rogers claims, then the biblical opposition would be total and absolute because *any* homosexual union, including committed homosexual unions, would threaten to undermine male rule over women by allowing a man to serve as the passive partner in a male homosexual union and a woman to serve as the dominant, active partner in a female homosexual union. So Rogers cannot logically have it both ways. He can't insist both that (1) the Bible's rejection of homosexual unions was never intended to include caring homosexual unions and that (2) the Bible's rejection of homosexual unions fundamentally rests on a desire to prevent women from taking an assertive role in sexual relations, whether the relationship was committed or not.

Why does Rogers get caught in this contradiction? Partly the reason is that Rogers's work is derivative—Rogers doesn't think through the issues himself and doesn't have any expertise in biblical scholarship but simply parrots uncritically any biblical scholar whom he thinks will help him reach his overall conclusion. This leads us to what appears to be the major reason that Rogers allows himself to get caught in this contradiction: Rogers isn't really interested in finding out what Scripture says. He is interested in pacifying Scripture so that it does not oppose his desire to support homosexual practice reached on grounds other than Scripture. *Any* argument will do for disabling Scripture's statements that appear to speak absolutely against homosexual practice. Consistency of argumentation is secondary to this overall goal.

- **While claiming repeatedly that he pays attention to the historical-cultural and literary contexts** of scripture texts and lifting up three guidelines for interpreting Scripture that stress context matters (nos. 2, 6, 7; pp. 57-66), **Rogers shows very little awareness of such context matters.** Numerous examples could be cited, regarding every biblical text that Rogers deals with as well as many that he does not touch upon because he doesn't understand the contextual connection. **Here we must be very selective in citing a few examples out of many:**
 - *Contextual problems with Rogers's orientation argument.* In ch. 4 Rogers reproduces seven guidelines for interpreting the Bible in times of controversy that the PCUSA came out with in 1992 from two previous documents. The second guideline is: "Let the focus be on the plain text of Scripture, to the grammatical and historical context. . . ." In his commentary Rogers gives as an example of appropriate use of historical context something that is actually in error: "The Bible . . . has no concept like our present understanding of a person with a homosexual orientation. Indeed, the concept of an ongoing sexual attraction to people of one's own sex did not exist . . . until the late nineteenth century" (p. 58). To suggest that no one in the ancient world posited congenital influences on at least some homosexual development or viewed some persons as exclusively attracted to members of the same sex is patently false. Rogers can only make the claim by completely ignoring work done by Brooten, Schoedel and myself on this matter (see above for Brooten and Schoedel; from my own work see especially my article "Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?" in *Christian Sexuality* (ed. R. Saltzmann; Kirk House, 2003), especially pp. 141-52; summarized in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, pp. 101-2 [with online notes] and dealt with in a preliminary way in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 384-85, 392-95). Thomas K. Hubbard, editor of *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (University of California Press, 2003), who supplies excellent introductions for each of ten chapters of compendious source materials, writes:

Homosexuality in this era [viz., of the early imperial age of Rome] may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began

to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation. (p. 386)

He also points to a series of later texts from the second to fourth centuries A.D., as with much earlier Aristotelian and Hippocratic works, that “reflect the perception that sexual orientation is something fixed and incurable” (p. 446). It is important to add here that many of the same Greco-Roman moralists and physicians who held such views could still oppose the behaviors arising from homoerotic predispositions. They could do so by distinguishing, as one Aristotelian text puts it, between behavior that is in accordance with nature and behavior that, though given “by nature,” is yet “constituted contrary to nature” as a “defect” (*Problems* 4.26). Rogers doesn’t even show any awareness of the literature on this subject, let alone respond to the arguments. It is most ironic that Rogers uses as his prime example of the need to place “the plain text of Scripture . . . [in] the grammatical and historical context” an example that shows that Rogers does not know the historical context (pp. 57-58). And yet it cannot be a matter of mere ignorance if Rogers has read my books on the subject—as he claims to have done. He has willfully chosen not to alert the reader to the problems with his view.

- ***Contextual problems with Rogers’s idolatrous sexuality argument.*** The other example that Rogers gives under guideline 2 for attention to historical context is his suggestion that the biblical indictments of homosexual practice were intended to apply only to people who “worship other gods” and not to “Christian people who are worshipping the one true God whom Jesus called us to worship” (p. 58). This is partly also a literary context issue. At any rate it is another demonstration that Rogers is poorly informed about context matters. It assumes, for example, that ancient Israel and early Judaism would have understood the Levitical proscriptions against male-male intercourse to apply only to acts conducted in the context of idol worship. In effect, it would have been okay for two men to be in a sexual relationship with each other as long as they did not deviate from worship of Yahweh. This is historically preposterous. Simply laying same-sex intercourse at the doorstep of idolatry does not explain why Paul finds this particular activity committed by idolaters, and not some others, so very wrong.

By the same token, while Paul in Rom 1:24-27 presents homosexual practice as a consequence of idolatry it is clear that he does not see idolatry in the strict sense (i.e., the worship of statues or other images) as a necessary precursor to homosexual practice. Certainly none of the other vices enumerated in 1:29-31 require prior worship of statues, even though here too Paul treats such vices as the consequence of worshipping idols and God’s handing over (1:28). Moreover, Paul does not say in Rom 1:24-27 that homosexual desire itself originates from the worship of statues. It says only that God “gave/handed over” idolaters to such desire and to

other desires (1:24, 26, 28)—desires that were apparently preexisting but not overpowering. The story presented in Rom 1:18-32 is not about the origination of sin (for which see the discussion of Adam’s fall in Rom 5:12-21) but rather about how it is that sinful *practices* are qualitatively and quantitatively greater in the Gentile world than in the Jewish world. As regards to the vice list in 1 Cor 6:9-10, where the term “men who lie with a male” is included, obviously none of the vices in the list presupposes prior worship of statues (excepting, of course, the vice of idolatry). Paul knew that a believer could as well engage in male-male intercourse as in man-mother incest (1 Cor 5) quite apart from participating in idol worship in the strict sense. Indeed, the context of both the real case of the incestuous man in ch. 5 and the hypothetical example of a believer having sex with prostitutes in 6:15-20 presupposes that Christian offenders are primarily in view in 6:9-10.

All these matters are thoroughly discussed in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 284-89 (“Did Paul Think Only Idol Worshipers Could Engage in Same-Sex Intercourse?”). The same arguments also appear, along with others, in my online article, “Bad Reasons for Changing One’s Mind: Jack Rogers’s Temple Prostitution Argument and Other False Starts” (Mar. 1, 2004; at <http://www.robagnon.net/ResponseToRogers2.htm> for html version and <http://www.robagnon.net/articles/homoRogersResp2.pdf> for pdf). This was a response to a presentation by Rogers posted on the Covenant Network website, in which he attempted unsuccessfully to dismiss my work through distortion. I know for a fact that Rogers knew about the article. So Rogers must have been aware of the powerful arguments against his position. But he didn’t want to alert readers of his book to these arguments. Surely if he had been able to rebut my arguments he would have done so. The fact that he leaves them unmentioned once more underscores the dishonesty of his presentation.

- *Homosexual temple prostitution at Corinth?* Speaking of my article, “Bad Reasons for Changing One’s Mind,” it is interesting that the Rogers piece to which my article was responding highlighted Rogers’s visit to Corinth as a “significant occasion” when he ‘realized’ that Paul’s remarks about homosexual practice were restricted to “idolatrous people engaged in prostitution.” Rogers got this pivotal ‘insight’ when he looked up at the ruins of the temple to Aphrodite on the hill known as AcroCorinth and surmised that when Paul wrote Rom 1:24-27 from Corinth

he was remembering the AcroCorinth and saying: “That is the worst example of idolatry I have ever seen.” I would agree. Paul’s point is not about homosexuality, but idolatry, worshipping false gods.

You can still see Rogers's article on the Covenant Network website at <http://covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/Rogers.htm>. As I pointed out in my response, there is a universal scholarly consensus that there was no temple prostitution at this temple in Paul's day (and no evidence that there was *ever* any homosexual cult prostitution at this site). Yet, oddly enough, though Rogers describes his experience as a "significant occasion" for rethinking his views on Paul and homosexual practice, he nowhere mentions this defining moment in his new book's chapter-long description of how he came to change his views (ch. 1, pp. 1-16). This is known as "rewriting history." This is an example both of how Rogers does not know the historical context well and of how he conveniently leaves out of his book what does not help his case—even his own wrongly interpreted life experience.

- **Contextual problems with Rogers's misogyny argument.** Under guideline 6—"interpretation of the Bible requires earnest study . . . to interpret the influence of the historical and cultural context"—Rogers focuses on the misogyny argument (which, we noted above, Rogers uses in spite of the fact that it contradicts his assertion that the Bible does not oppose all homosexual practice). According to Rogers, "the assumption of male gender superiority is a significant aspect of the historical and cultural context of the biblical passages that seem to discuss homosexuality" (p. 64). He then goes on to give three short quotes from Nissinen, Bird, and Furnish to the effect that the motivation behind Scripture's apparent opposition to homosexual practice arises from a desire to keep men in a position of superiority and dominance over women. There are at least three things pertaining to a broader context of male dominance that Rogers either doesn't know—because he doesn't follow the guideline to study earnestly the historical-cultural context of Scripture—or conveniently forgets to inform readers of.

(1) In the Greco-Roman milieu opposition to male homosexual practice intensified as appreciation for women grew. As Thomas K. Hubbard puts it, in the age of imperial Rome "the increasingly liberated status of women was crucial to the polarization of sexual preferences." When one looks at ancient debates over whether male-female love or male-male love is superior (Plutarch's *Dialogue on Love* 1-12, Achilles Tatius' *Lucretia and Clitophon* 35-38, and pseudo-Lucian's *Affairs of the Heart*), one finds that the heterosexual position espouses a *higher* view of women as suitable companions and friends deserving of equal pleasure in the sexual bond, "whereas the pederast's position seems in every case to have its origins in a fundamental hatred of women" (*Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 444-5). The Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus, for example, combined an affirmation of women's capacity for learning philosophy with a strong rejection of homosexual practice (12). Hence, it

is no surprise that as trends developed toward greater roles for women in early Christianity (compared with early Judaism generally) opposition to homosexual practice in no way diminished.

(2) Given this correlation in the ancient world between increasing women's liberation and intensified opposition to all homosexual practice, it is not surprising that **even Greco-Roman critiques of homoeroticism are often motivated by considerations other than misogyny. For example, the structural complementarity of the sexes, as regards both anatomical and procreative design, is often cited by opponents of homosexual practice.** As Hubbard notes: "Basic to the heterosexual position is the characteristic Stoic appeal to the providence of Nature, which has matched and fitted the sexes to each other" (ibid.). Similarly, Craig A. Williams acknowledges: "Some kind of argument from 'design' seems to lurk in the background of Cicero's, Seneca's, and Musonius' claims: the penis is 'designed' to penetrate the vagina, the vagina is 'designed' to be penetrated by the penis" (*Roman Homosexuality* [Oxford University Press, 1999], 242). The second-century (A.D.) physician Soranus (or his fifth-century "translator" Caelius Aurelianus) characterized desires of "soft men" to be penetrated by other men as "not from nature" insofar as they "subjugated to obscene uses parts not so intended" and disregarded "the places of our body which divine providence destined for definite functions" (*On Chronic Disorders* 4.9.131). Part of Charicles' attack on all homosexual practice in *Affairs of the Heart* is the assertion that male-male love is an erotic attraction for what one already is as a sexual being:

She (viz., Aphrodite) cleverly devised a twofold nature in each (species). . . . having written down a divinely sanctioned rule of necessity, that each of the two (genders) remain in their own nature. . . . Then wantonness, daring all, transgressed the laws of nature. . . . And who then first looked with the eyes at the male as at a female . . . ? One nature came together in one bed. But *seeing themselves in one another* they were ashamed neither of what they were doing nor of what they were having done to them. (19-20; my emphasis)

(3) If early Judaism and early Christianity were merely imitating misogynistic trends in the broader cultural environment when it condemned homosexual practice, then **why was opposition to homosexual practice more intense in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity than anywhere else in the known ancient world of the Mediterranean basin?** If we follow Rogers's reasoning, one can only arrive at the absurd corollary that the writers of Scripture, and Jesus, were among the biggest misogynists of the Greco-Roman world. This corollary flies in the face of significant evidence in both Testaments, but especially in the New Testament, of significant roles for women. Had issues of status and gender stratification been the sole, or even primary, motivating force behind scriptural opposition to homosexual practice

rather than gender differentiation, then the same sort of qualified mentality against homoerotic behavior prevailing in the ancient world would likely have developed in ancient Israel and in early Judaism and Christianity. For in the ancient world some significant accommodation was made to male homosexual practice within a broader misogynistic bent, specifically the right of males to penetrate socially inferior males such as youths, foreigners, and slaves. The greater the role played by status over gender, such that an inferior male could be considered less of a male, the more openness to homosexual practice existed. It is precisely the intense opposition to all homosexual practice in early Judaism and Christianity that leads to the conclusion that for these subcultures gender differentiation was a far greater concern than gender stratification.

For these three reasons, the misogyny argument put forward in a very uncritical and unreflective way by Rogers—parroting Nissinen, Bird, and Furnish—must be judged untenable. Rogers simply doesn't understand well the Scripture texts having to do with homosexual practice in their cultural and historical context.

Continued in Installment 3