

The Bible and the “Gay Marriage” Question: A Response to Prof. Lee Jefferson's op-ed piece for the *Huffington Post*

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What does the Bible actually say about “gay marriage”? That question is the title of a recent op-ed piece in the [Huffington Post](#) (June 29, 2011) written by [Lee Jefferson](#), a visiting assistant professor of religion at Centre College. According to Jefferson the answer is: “Nothing,” or at least “Nothing negative.” Jefferson used the recent passage of “gay marriage” by the New York legislature as a springboard from which to denigrate appeals to the Bible against homosexual practice. I will use Jefferson’s article as a springboard from which to answer the question that he and many others have raised.

It is of relevance that, though Jefferson gives the appearance of speaking with authority on the question, he has not (to my knowledge) published any academic work on the issue of the Bible and homosexual practice. His expertise is not in the Bible but in Christian art of Late Antiquity. Jefferson also shows little or no awareness in his article of the array of strong arguments against his claims.

In addition, Jefferson exhibits an unfortunate tendentiousness in his characterizations. He speaks glowingly of the “enlightening progress in our culture concerning the LGBT community.” Those who disagree represent a “cacophonous opposition” that uses religion as “a bruising hammer” and lobbs “textual grenades”—as if the homosexualist advocacy groups have not been even louder and more belligerent and strident. The fact that the media is overwhelmingly on the side of promoting homosexual unions is not enough for Jefferson. He bemoans the fact that the media reports *any* dissent to this party line.

It should go without saying that upholding a male-female requirement for marriage can and should be a product of a loving desire to avoid the degradation of the gendered self that comes from engaging in homosexual practice. That it does not go without saying is due in large part to today’s charged political atmosphere where hateful characterizations of persons who disapprove of homosexual unions are commonplace among proponents of such unions.

This hateful reaction stems largely from a comparison of such persons to racists and sexists. Yet such a comparison begs the question of whether the comparison is accurate. If opposition to gay marriage is more like opposition to marriage between close kin and to marriage between three or more persons, than one arrives at very different conclusions about what constitutes love.

And now on to Jefferson's arguments.

The ancient world and homosexual orientation

A linchpin of Jefferson's case is his claim that no one in the Greco-Roman world had any knowledge of something akin to "same-sex orientation." Jefferson ironically makes this claim while insisting on the importance of understanding the ancient context behind the biblical text.

The fact is that in the Greco-Roman world theories existed that posited at least some congenital basis for some forms of homosexual attraction, particularly on the part of males desiring to be penetrated. These theories derived from Platonic, Aristotelian, Hippocratic, and even astrological sources. They included: a creation splitting of male-male or female-female binary humans; a particular mix of male and female sperm elements at conception; a chronic disease of the mind or soul influenced indirectly by biological factors and made hard to resist by socialization; an inherited disease analogous to a mutated gene; sperm ducts leading to the anus; and the particular alignment of heavenly constellations at the time of one's birth.

Some of the ancient theories are obviously closer to modern theories than others. What matters, though, is that many in the ancient world attributed one or more forms of homosexual practice to an interplay of nature and nurture. Many viewed same-sex attractions for some persons as exclusive and very resistant to change.

Jefferson gives no indication that he is aware of the literature that contravenes his claim. Contrast Jefferson's remarks with the observation of Thomas K. Hubbard, a classicist at the University of Texas (Austin), in his magisterial book, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (University of California Press, 2003): "Homosexuality in this era [i.e., 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). Hubbard also points to a series of later texts from the second to fourth centuries that "reflect the perception that sexual orientation is something fixed and incurable" (p. 446).

Contrast it too with this assessment by Bernadette J. Brooten, professor of Christian Studies at Brandeis University and a self-avowed lesbian, in her important work, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1996):

Paul could have believed that *tribades* [the active female partners in a female homosexual bond], the ancient *kinaidoi* [the passive male partners in a male homosexual bond], and other sexually unorthodox persons were born that way and yet still condemn them as unnatural and shameful. . . . I see Paul as condemning all forms of homoeroticism as the unnatural acts of people who had turned away from God. (p. 446)

Other scholars who have written major works on the Bible and homosexuality make similar points, such as William Schoedel, professor emeritus of classics and early Christianity from the University of Illinois, and Martti Nissinen, professor of Old Testament at the University of Helsinki. Note too that all these scholars have written from a stance supportive of homosexual unions.

Although it is usually assumed that Paul in Rom 1:24-27 treats homosexual attraction solely as a chosen condition of constitutional heterosexuals, nothing in the wording of the text substantiates such an assumption. The expressions “exchanged” and “leaving behind” in 1.26-27 do not refer to a willful exchange of heterosexual desire for homosexual desire. Rather, they refer to a choice of gratifying innate homoerotic desires instead of complying with the evidence of male-female complementarity transparent in material creation or nature.

Furthermore, as with Philo of Alexandria (a first-century Jewish philosopher), Paul was probably aware of the existence of a lifelong homoerotic proclivity at least among the “soft men” (*malakoi*) who, even as adults, feminized their appearance to attract male sex partners (1 Cor 6:9). Paul viewed sin as an innate impulse, passed on by a foundational ancestor, running through the members of the human body, and never entirely within human control (see his discussion in Romans 7:7-23). So any theory positing congenital influences on homosexual development would obviously have made little difference to Paul’s opposition to all same-sex intercourse.

The evidence indicates that some Greco-Roman moralists and physicians, operating within a culture that tolerated and at times endorsed at least some homosexual practice, could reject even committed homosexual unions entered into by those with a biological predisposition toward such unions. What, then, is the likelihood that the apostle Paul, operating out of a Jewish subculture that was more strongly opposed to homosexual practice than any other known culture in the Mediterranean Basin or ancient Near East, would have embraced such unions?

It is important to bear in mind also that semi-official marriages between men and between women were well known in the Greco-Roman world (even the rabbis were aware of such things, as also Church Fathers). The notion that adult-committed homosexual relationships first originated in the modern era is historically indefensible. Consequently, it cannot be used as a “new knowledge” argument for dismissing the biblical witness. Even Louis Crompton, an historian and self-avowed “gay” man, has drawn the proper conclusion from this historical data in his highly acclaimed book, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Harvard University Press, 2003):

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)

Genesis 2 and its implications for "gay marriage"

Another flawed argument that Jefferson makes is that "the Bible does not clearly endorse one form of marriage over another." This would have been news to every first-century Jew, including the historian Josephus. Josephus explained to Gentile readers that "the Law [of Moses] recognizes only sexual intercourse that is according to nature, that which is with a woman. . . . But it abhors the intercourse of males with males" (*Against Apion* 2.199).

Jefferson tries to substantiate his claim by asserting that the story about Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 "is a gender creation story, not a creation of marriage story." Yet Genesis 2:24 clearly extrapolates from the story about the creation of woman in 2:18-23 the marriage principle that "for this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be joined to his woman (wife) and become one flesh."

The narrative begins with an originally sexually-undifferentiated human (Heb. *adam*, "earthling"), from whom some indeterminate portion of bone and flesh is taken from one of the human's "sides" (a better translation than "ribs" since it is the meaning given to this word, *tsela*, everywhere else in the Old Testament). This extraction is made in order to form a woman, thereafter turning the *adam* into a gender-specific man (Heb. *ish*). The woman is depicted as the man's "counterpart" or "complement" (2:18, 20)—a translation of Heb. *neged* that means both "corresponding to" (denoting likeness as regards humanity) and "opposite" (denoting difference as regards sex or gender).

The subtext of the story is that man and woman may unite in marriage to become "one flesh" because out of one flesh the two came. This is a beautiful image of a transcendent reality: that man and woman are each other's sexual "other half," the missing element in the spectrum of sexuality. Clearly the story indicates a foundational male-female prerequisite for valid sexual unions, irrespective of (as Jefferson puts it) the absence of "a jazz band reception in Paradise."

Jesus and "gay marriage"

Jesus apparently understood Genesis 1:27 (God "made them male and female") and Genesis 2:24 (cited above) as implying a male-female requirement for marriage. Jesus cited these two texts back-to-back (Mark 10:2-12; Matthew 19:3-12) in order to make the

point that the complementary twoness of the sexes, male and female, is the foundation for limiting the number of partners in a sexual union to two.

When man and woman unite in marriage, the sexual spectrum is completed such that a third partner is neither necessary nor desirable. Jesus applied this principle not only explicitly to a rejection of a revolving door of divorce-and-remarriage (a form of serial polygamy) but also implicitly to polygamy, which both in Jesus' day and in ours is the easier prohibition.

We know that this was Jesus' point because the sectarian Jewish group known as the Essenes (who regarded even the Pharisees as too lax in their observance of the Law of Moses) similarly rejected polygamy on the grounds that God made us "male and female" (*zakar uneqevah*). They connected this phrase in Genesis 1:27 to its occurrence in the Noah's ark narrative where the twoness of the bond is stressed ("two by two"; *Damascus Covenant* 4.20-5.1). They then deduced that God's will at creation was for marriage to be a partnership of two and only two persons.

Jefferson stresses Jesus' silence on the issue of homosexual practice as "exhibit A" for his claim that "same-sex practice is a topic of little interest to the Biblical authors." Yet Jesus also says nothing about incest or bestiality. Surely this "silence" does not suggest Jesus' indifference. Why should Jesus spend time talking explicitly about offenses that no Jew in first-century Palestine is advocating, let alone engaging in, and that his Hebrew Scriptures already proscribe in no uncertain terms?

Clearly Jesus regarded a male-female requirement in marriage as an "irreducible minimum" in sexual ethics, the foundation on which other sexual standards are predicated, including monogamy. By definition the foundation is more important than anything built on the foundation.

A half dozen other historical arguments establish Jesus' opposition to homosexual practice, including his adherence to the Law of Moses generally and his intensification of sexual ethics in particular (not only as regards polygamy and divorce-and-remarriage but also as regards "adultery of the heart"); the fact that the man who baptized him (John the Baptist) got beheaded for defending Levitical sex laws; and both early Judaism's and the early church's univocal opposition to homosexual practice as an egregious offense. Jesus wasn't shy about expressing disagreement with prevailing norms. Silence speaks for his acceptance of the prevailing view.

Some texts that speak directly to homosexual practice

Jefferson characterizes the texts that speak directly to the issue of homosexual practice as "scant indeed." Yet the number of biblical texts doing so is comparable to the number of texts addressing incest and greater than those prohibiting bestiality. If one looks at Scripture contextually (as Jefferson urges others to do) it will be evident that Scripture's opposition to homosexual practice is deeply embedded in the fabric of its sexual ethics.

In fact, every text in Scripture treating sexual matters, whether narrative, law, proverb, poetry, moral exhortation, or metaphor, presupposes a male-female prerequisite for all sexual activity. For example, in Old Testament law there are constant distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate forms of other-sex intercourse but nothing of the sort for same-sex intercourse. The reason for this is apparent: Since same-sex intercourse was always unacceptable, there was no need to make such distinctions. Another example involves metaphor: Even though ancient Israel was a male-dominated society, it imaged itself in relation to Yahweh as a female to a husband, so as to avoid the imagery of a man-male sexual bond.

Jefferson's interpretation of texts that more or less directly address homosexual practice is deeply flawed. He writes off the Sodom episode in Genesis 19 as a text concerned with hospitality, not homosexual practice. This makes an either-or out of a both-and. The episode at Sodom is viewed in early Judaism as a paradigmatic example of gross inhospitality to visitors precisely because the men of Sodom seek to dishonor the sexuality of the male visitors. By asking to have sex with them as though they were females they treat the maleness of the visitors as of no account. The fact that this is done in the context of attempted rape is no more an indication of the irrelevance of the homosexual aspect than is a story about incestuous rape (so, I would argue, Ham's act against his father Noah in Genesis 9) irrelevant for indicting adult-consensual incest.

Jefferson dismisses the prohibitions of man-male intercourse in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as limited to a particular time and place in Israel's history, like dietary restrictions and the prohibition of cloth mixtures. But the prohibition of man-male intercourse is more closely related in its context to the prohibitions of other sexual offenses that we continue to prohibit today: incest, adultery, and bestiality. The Holiness Code in Leviticus (chaps. 17-26) specifically refers to these forbidden sex acts as "iniquity" or "sin," not just ritual uncleanness (18:25). It does not allow absolution merely through ritual acts (such as bathing and waiting for the sun to go down). It does not treat these sexual offenses as making the participants contagious to touch (unlike some ritual impurity offenses). The penalty applies only to those who engage in these acts with willful intent (whereas ritual purity infractions encompass both advertent and inadvertent acts). Leviticus applies the prohibitions not just to Jews but to Gentiles inhabiting the land. For all these reasons the prohibitions of incest, adultery, man-male intercourse, and bestiality do not look like merely ritual offenses.

The prohibition of cloth mixtures is largely symbolic, since the penalty is only the destruction of the cloth (not the wearer) and since too some cloth mixtures are enjoined for the Tabernacle, parts of the priestly wardrobe, and the tassel worn by the laity (apparently on the assumption that cloth mixtures symbolized 'penetration' into the divine realm, which was inappropriate in non-sacral contexts). The prohibition of incest is a much closer analogy to the prohibition of man-male intercourse than dietary rules or rules against cloth mixtures, since both incest and same-sex intercourse involve sexual offenses between persons too much alike in terms of embodied structures—one as regards kinship, the other as regards gender.

As regards Paul, Jefferson provides an odd reason for discounting the offender list in 1 Corinthians 6:9, which includes an indictment of “soft men” (*malakoi*, see above) and “men who lie with a male” (*arsenokoitai*). His reason is that “these terms are injected along with” other sexual offenders, namely, “the sexually immoral” (*pornoi*, not limited to fornicators, contra Jefferson), adulterers, and (in context) persons who engage in incest (chap. 5) and sex with a prostitute (6:15-17). “In other words, Paul is addressing ALL deviant sexual and immoral behavior, not just that of a same-sex variety.” To this argument I can only say: So what? Who ever claimed that Christian sexual ethics were opposed *only* to homosexual practice?

Jefferson then claims that “it is unclear whether [Romans 1:26-27] truly is a condemnation of a specific practice.” This is a bizarre claim. Paul specifically refers to females exchanging “the natural use [i.e. of the male] for that which is contrary to nature”; and, “likewise” to males “leaving behind the natural use of the woman” and becoming “inflamed in their yearning for one another, males with males.” That doesn’t sound ambiguous to me.

Moreover, there are eight points of correspondence, in the same tripartite order, between the creation text in Genesis 1:26-27 and Paul’s argument in Romans 1:23-27. This indicates that Paul is thinking of homosexual practice as a violation of the creation of “male and female” in Genesis 1:27. The nature argument is a common one for Greco-Roman moralists seeking to indict homosexual practice on absolute grounds. It seems to me that we should make a distinction between Jefferson wanting Romans 1:26-27 to be unclear and the actual clarity of the text itself.

Biblical arguments and our civil law

The final argument that Jefferson makes (which is listed first in his article but which I am treating last) is that “the institution of marriage is a secular and social institution.” As such, Jefferson argues, referring to what the Bible says about homosexual practice is irrelevant for civil law. There are two problems with this view. One is that people of faith are shaped morally by their religious beliefs and have a right to vote such beliefs, just as atheists or those philosophically inclined have a right to vote according to their respective ideologies. This is especially so in cases where these beliefs are not restricted to a single sectarian religious community and where what is “imposed” is not incarceration and fines but a withholding of public approval. On both counts opposition to “gay marriage” passes muster. The roots of moral reasoning in Western civilization derive largely from religious foundations. Indeed, discussion of “morality” seems out of place in a context where there is no higher power. Without God, ethics are reduced to utilitarian considerations.

An even more important point is that one can make a reasonable case against “gay marriage” on secular philosophical grounds; that is, by an argument from nature and by appeal to analogies already in place in our civil law. The Bible itself points in this direction with the argument from nature in Romans 1:24-27, an argument based on the compatible structures of male and female that should be obvious even to those without Scripture; structures that requires a deliberate suppression of truth to override.

Put simply, if the logic of a heterosexual union is that the two halves of the sexual spectrum, male and female, unite to form a single sexual whole, the “logic” of a homosexual union is that two half-males unite to form a single whole male or two half-females unite to form a single whole female. By implication homosexual unions dishonor the integrity of the stamp of maleness on males and of femaleness on females by effectively treating their sex or gender as only half intact, needing to be supplemented structurally by union with someone of the same sex.

The closest analogies in civil law to a prohibition of “gay marriage” are laws prohibiting the marriage of close kin and the marriage of three or more persons.

As regards the incest analogue, homosexual unions are unions between persons who are too much structurally alike, in terms of sex or gender, much as an incestuous union is wrong because it involves two persons too much alike on the level of kinship identity. The analogy is often rejected by proponents of homosexual unions. They claim that incest is *always* harmful because it involves children and leads to birth defects. However, incest can (and has) been conducted by consenting adults. Moreover, many kinds of incestuous unions would not entail procreation: incestuous bonds where at least one party is infertile, active birth-control measures are taken, or the participants are of the same sex. In short, incest does not produce intrinsic measurable harm (not even when procreation occurs); disproportionately high rates, yes, but intrinsic, no.

Homosexual unions likewise experience disproportionately high rates of measurable harm, not intrinsic measurable harm. Moreover, this harm corresponds to gender type. Male homosexual activity, even relative to lesbian unions, is characterized by extraordinarily high numbers of sex partners lifetime and by extraordinarily high rates of sexually transmitted infections. Female homosexual activity, even relative to male homosexuality, is characterized by relationships of lower longevity and higher rates of some mental health problems (not surprising, perhaps, in view of the greater expectations that women generally place on relationships for self-worth and fulfillment). The existence of disparities of harm between male and female homosexual relationships, corresponding to gender differences, is a sign that some harm stems simply from the same-sexness of homosexuality. In homosexual relationships the extremes of a given sex are not moderated and the gaps in the sexual self are not filled, at least not as well, on the whole, as heterosexual relationships.

To withhold marriage from all near-kin unions (certainly between a parent and an adult child or between full siblings) one has to develop a philosophical argument about intrinsic harm. The only such argument of which I am aware involves the recognition that procreative difficulties are not the root harm of incestuous unions but only the symptom of the root harm. The root harm is the attempt to unite sexually with someone who is too much of an embodied same, not enough of a complementary other. If the procreative difficulties associated with incestuous bonds are the clue as to their root harm, so too the structural incapacity for procreation on the part of homosexual bonds should indicate to observers a similar root harm.

As regards the polyamory (multiple-partner) analogue, we have noted above in our discussion of Jesus' rationale that a prohibition of polygamy is grounded ultimately in the natural law argument that the existence of two and only two primary sexes—complementary to each other in terms of anatomy, physiology, and psychology—implies a limitation of two persons to a sexual union at any one time. If we don't grant marriage licenses to three or more persons in a concurrent sexual relationship, why should we grant marriage licenses to homosexual unions that disregard the foundational twoness of the sexes on which the limitation of two persons is based? There are examples of polyamorous unions going on in the United States that are adult-consensual, loving, and without measurable harm.

Of course, my point here is not that the state should issue marriage licenses to close kin or to three or more persons concurrently. My point is rather that, since adult-committed incestuous unions and polyamorous unions are analogically related to adult-committed homosexual unions, one shouldn't approve of granting marriage licenses to the latter case unless one is also willing to grant marriage licenses to the former two cases. People can choose to be inconsistent—perhaps, let's hope so in this case. However, that doesn't change their inconsistency into consistency.

And make no mistake about it: Homosexual unions are a more foundational violation of sexual ethics than incestuous or polyamorous unions since the latter two are logically extrapolated from the former rather than the other way around. The recognition of the need for embodied complementarity and acceptance of the essential duality of a male-female bond is prior to any conclusions that may or may not be reached about incest and polyamory.

This is certainly true about the development of sexual ethics in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity. Loopholes for incest and polyamory were revoked over time. But in the biblical record there never were any loopholes allowable for homosexual practice. The most basic division for human sexual behavior is the differentiation of the sexes, not differentiation along the lines of kinship or limitation of number.

In conclusion, Lee Jefferson doesn't *want* the Bible to have anything to "say" about "gay marriage." His want then infuses his interpretation of the biblical text, skewing the results. He attempts to make his case by arguing that "the Bible is not specific, literate, or even concerned with what we call same-sex orientation or gay marriage," when in fact we have seen the exact opposite to be the case. He blames proponents of a male-female requirement for not investigating the "ancient cultural context." Yet he himself appears not to know it.

Jefferson thinks that people should "quit focusing on what the Bible didactically 'says'"—a contention that ignores the helpful contribution of the Bible throughout Western civilization to a whole host of social justice issues. I suspect that what Jefferson is really upset about is seeing the Bible applied to the specific issue of homosexual

practice. So applied it simply doesn't cut in the direction that he would like to see it cut. Nor, I might add, do secular considerations suggest a need to divert from that witness.

For further reading:

See my book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001); my shorter co-authored volume (with Dan O. Via), *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); and copious other materials at www.robgagnon.net.

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