Biblical Sexuality

AUTHOR JENNIFER KNUST ON WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY
BY KIMBERLY CORNUELLE

Even for nonbelievers, the Holy Bible can offer timeless inspiration, guidance, and drama. But, says Jennifer Knust, a School of Theology assistant professor of New Testament and Christian origins, it’s far too ambiguous to serve as a guide to sexual behavior, despite U.S. courts’ history of using it to justify sodomy laws that have only recently been struck down. In 1975, when Virginia’s sodomy law was challenged, a federal court upheld the statute, arguing that it was rooted in Judaic and Christian law — and quoted Leviticus as justification. It took twenty-eight years before the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated sodomy laws, including Virginia’s — in 2003, a year after Massachusetts had struck down its sodomy laws.

Knust’s 2005 book, Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity (Columbia University Press), examines the use of sexualized vocabulary by Christian authors from Paul to Irenaeus of Lyons. Her next book, scheduled for release this year, scours the Bible for a unified perspective on sexual behavior.

“My main argument is that biblical texts do not speak with one voice,” says Knust, also a College of Arts & Sciences assistant professor of religion and an ordained American Baptist USA pastor. “There is no shortcut to sexual ethics through the Bible.”

Knust spoke to Bostonia about what the Bible does and does not say about homosexuality.

Bostonia: Does the Bible say anything at all about homosexuality?

Knust: The Bible doesn’t say any one thing about homosexuality. Arguably, it doesn’t say anything about homosexuality at all, in the sense that someone would think of that word and what it means today. The idea that homosexuality — as it’s understood in a contemporary American context — has anything to do with the way that same-sex attraction and pairing might have been understood in the seventh century BCE or the first century CE is just preposterous.

The idea that we could go back and find a single sexual morality from the Bible is problematic not only because of the historical and cultural difference between ourselves and these books, but because the books themselves are contradictory.

Are there passages that do mention same-sex attraction?

The Song of Songs celebrates nonmarital desire, and in the context of early Jewish and Christian interpretation, that’s an occasion for queer theology. The Christian interpretation is, how do we imagine
ourselves as the bride of Christ? But of course it’s men imagining themselves as the bride of Christ. In the rabbinic tradition, they’re imagining themselves as Yahweh’s wife.

How do you refocus people to think about the context of biblical texts?
We’ve lost a lot of the sense of why the text was written, what it was trying to address. We just don’t have the information we would need to understand the diversity of people and opinions — even the vocabulary of the time and assumptions that people would bring to the text. Think about medical literature in antiquity; the ideas are so foreign to our

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own medical literature. If we’re going to think about homosexuality as a biological category, what kind of biology are we thinking about? It would be ludicrous to use those texts today.

How do the texts reflect sexuality?
Human beings think about and talk about sexual desire — that is a constant. Are there passages that mention sexual desire between men in the Bible? Yes. Are there passages that allude to sexual desire between women? Yes. But details about how that same-sex desire is understood and represented have changed.

The reason people look to the Bible to come up with doctrinal or dogmatic statements about what sexuality is has to do with the overwhelming cultural authority of the Bible. If one can claim that the Bible is on one’s side, apparently the conversation is supposed to shut down.

But it has the opposite effect, because a person will say, “The Bible is on my side, and it says x,” and the other person will say, “The Bible is on my side and says y.” There’s no way to solve that dilemma.

As long as we think we can get to some shorthand solution by beginning a sentence, “The Bible says ...” we will continue to look to the Bible to say something, and not solve our problem. And we won’t hold ourselves responsible for the sexual decisions we’re making.

Is the Bible worth interpreting on these points if it’s on another cultural level?
I think it’s worth reading the Bible to have access to different ways of thinking about sexual desire and to notice our common humanity with people from long ago, who were very concerned about sexual desire, about their bodies, about how God related to the way they desired.

It’s way of thinking with and through people who had similar questions to ours, but answered them in different ways. It’s like returning to our ancestral heritage, and we should take our ancestors seriously — if we consider the biblical authors to be our ancestors.

Do you get a lot of questions pointing to specific texts to try to prove a theory?
I’m a professor with the Massachusetts Bible Society, and someone asked a question online, “Did Paul and his world have any conception of faithful monogamous same-sex love?” I argued that Paul had little conception of faithful monogamous opposite-sex love, let alone same-sex love. In First Corinthians he’s more concerned about celibacy, not about heterosexual love. For people to want to use that text to argue for same-sex love or heterosexual marriage, this is a problem. It would make no sense to him; in his context slaves don’t get married, for example. In his context, celibacy is preferred, and the point of marriage is to protect couples from illicit sexual desire, not for procreation.

What about Leviticus?
One can’t help but note that in the holiness code, for example, the passage about men lying with men is identified as improper sexual behavior, placed along with sleeping with a woman who’s menstruating, committing adultery, committing incest or bestiality.

The framing of those laws is, don’t be like the Canaanites and the Egyptians. So is the point of the law to identify what the Israelite God thinks? That’s part of it, but another part is to put distance between the Israelites and the Canaanites and Egyptians. It’s also to accuse the Canaanites and Egyptians of behavior anathema to Yahweh.

Do you think people will ever stop using the Bible for their own arguments?
That’s my dream, that people will get the idea that there’s the notion of context.

I’m moving beyond sex to the broader question of biblical authority. Biblical texts are fluid, not stable, and it’s questionable whether a Bible that we read today in translation has anything to do with the Bible that Paul read or even Augustine read in Latin because his Greek was kind of crummy. He was reading crummy Latin translations. So I’d like to undermine the idea that these are the same books.

It also would be nice to talk about something constructive. There are wonderful texts in the Bible, and if we stop applying them in this simplistic way, maybe we could find something really beautiful — and stop using the Bible as a hurtful instrument.