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RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

James E Miller

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Studies in Biblical Sexuality

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RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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**Raw Material
An Introduction**

Pages 1-6

2nd Revised Ed. 2010

Raw Material: An Introduction

These studies on Biblical sexuality are presented as raw material for various Christian and Jewish faith traditions which use the Bible as a source of authority. Sexuality is the subject, and it is a very sensitive subject. In this controversial subject there is a need for clarity on the meanings of relevant Biblical texts before those texts are applied as policies. It is impossible to keep modern contexts from coloring our understanding of these ancient texts, so Biblical study should be done with this coloration in mind (Steck 172).

This book does not complete the task of applying its observations in the various churches. The task of application is complex and highly varied. One approach and one scholar cannot hope to satisfy the broad spectrum of denominations and congregations. At one point in these studies I observe that, “Your situation affects the questions you ask of the text, and questions that do not get asked also do not get answered.” (Chapter 7, p 43) One scholar, even when assisted by a library of varied commentaries, cannot possibly ask all of the questions that need answering. After finding some answers we move to the task of application, a process which requires yet another complex set of questions. I stand by my previous observation,

“A full and proper exposition of biblical authority and use in the various churches is far beyond the reach of any monograph, much less a journal article. . . . all churches, even the most “Bible based,” regardless of theories of Bible authority, regularly choose to ignore certain biblical injunctions that they find inappropriate or impossible to enforce. Biblical scholars can provide their churches with the raw data of textual exegesis, but what the churches make of the material is another issue entirely.”(Miller 1997: 865)

In part, this observation is informed by a standard seminary textbook on Old Testament theology (Hasel 35-96). We begin with the distinction between the work of the Bible scholar and the theologian. Ideally the former works within the mindset of the texts and the times in which they were produced and collected. The latter works with modern questions and categories, using the results of Bible scholarship as raw material. But the ideal is problematic, for the Bible scholar is a modern individual working from modern contexts, and the modern context influences the reading of the ancient texts. Usually the scholar is affiliated with a religious tradition which requires particular readings and findings, and secular culture will also influence the work of the scholar. In addition there are varied schools of thought on how the Bible scholar should handle the interaction of ancient contexts, modern categories and canonical

considerations.

No Bible scholar does ideal work, unaffected by modern questions and categories. Rather, the work of all Bible scholarship is shaped by modern demands and presuppositions. Even so, the Bible scholar usually does enter to a large extent the foreign world in which the Bible texts were produced, and does bring to the faith community important information concerning the messages intended by the writers and editors of the Biblical text. But this focus on the ancient context often means the Bible scholar is clumsy in handling the modern complexities which the scholar's work seeks to enlighten.

This means that well-trained Bible scholars are only as capable in the theological work of the modern faith communities as the any other lay person. The skills of the theologian are rather different than those of the Bible scholar, and extensive training in one field often results in a dearth of understanding and skill in the needs of the other field. The Bible scholar investigates and describes. The theologian reworks the results into forms the Bible scholar may not find recognizable – and may even find illegitimate.

And then the faith community, or its hierarchy, steps in and usually moves in accord with its own agendas and perceived needs. The resulting policies may be unrecognizable to both the Bible scholar and the theologian on whose work the policies are based. Hermeneutics is a messy business. It has to do with real life.

In those churches which use the Bible as almost their sole authority, there remains a broad range of application methods. In some cases the original ancient social context limits or otherwise modifies the literal application of the passage in the modern church (e.g. the criticism of braided hair, 1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3). In other cases the literal text may be applied directly (e.g. in some churches the practice of footwashing, often in connection with the Lord's Supper, John 13:12-15). Sometimes there is no application because there is too little attestation or detail (e.g. baptism for the dead, 1 Cor 15:29). Heavy reliance on a single text in one faith community is rightly viewed with suspicion in other faith communities. Some applications are diverse because the Bible seems to speak with more than one voice over the range of relevant texts (e.g. the ethics of war). A good resource on the variety of applications and strategies used in the churches is Willard Swartley's *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*.

In many of the Bible-based churches theological work is expected of each member. The

individual members are exhorted to “know the Bible” for themselves. Of course, they are also exhorted to follow a particular method of interpretation and to reach certain predetermined conclusions – conclusions favored by the congregation or denomination. These conclusions are therefore deemed the “plain sense” of the Bible. But consistency in method is the exception, not the rule, in these Bible-based churches.

This book will have cases where Bible teachings were once important in church policy, but are now ignored. These include church application of the strictures of Leviticus 15 (Chapter 6, Unclean Emissions), a ban on lending at interest, and on eating blood (both in Chapter 19, The Church Tradition of the Unnecessary Evil).

Please recognize that sexual minorities and other excluded individuals and groups are likely to choose the application strategies which provide them with the answers they prefer. They do this not because they are departing from the methods of their churches, but rather because they are following the example of their church leaders – the leaders of the churches which exclude them. A mirror is an essential tool in attempting to form church policy based on the Biblical text. The issues examined in this book might provide an opportunity for honest soul-searching on the part of conservatives who seek to hold their congregations to one particular interpretation and one specific policy for applying the accepted interpretation.

In other faith communities authority comes from tradition (church fathers, councils, saints and sages, etc.) and from leaders who claim apostolic succession. These church leaders often hold the authority over Scripture interpretation and application because of inherited authority. Also such leaders are often called upon to make determinations beyond the scope of the Scriptural text. Again, variety characterizes the applications of Scripture to the many policy statements of these communions. The variety is not only between communions, but also between the patriarchates or dioceses within a communion. Only occasionally is this method of Scripture application systematized in a monograph (e.g. Webb) so that the reader may observe the application strategies of communions which follow tradition and other extra-Biblical authorities, sometimes in preference to Biblical teachings. Chapter 19 will look at the influence of Greek philosophy on church policies concerning sexuality.

A number of influential theologians have used the Bible’s authority in ways which seem independent of any particular tradition. Siker has written a study of some of these methods and asked from each method important questions which any reader of this book could ask himself or

herself. Siker asks (pp 3-4),

1) “What Biblical texts are used?” Are particular sections of the Bible favored, or particular authors or books? Others phrase the question this way – Is there a canon within the canon – core Scripture which has more authority or relevance than other parts of Scripture? Christians tend to lean heavily on the New Testament, and neglect most of the law and genealogy in the Hebrew Scriptures. Many Protestants privilege Paul’s epistles over the other epistles, and even over the gospels. A theologian may refract the entire teaching of the Bible through the lens of a few closely related texts.

2) “How does the author use Scripture?” This is a very broad question. We might ask, is context consulted? How much interpretation is required before the Scripture may be applied? How are unwanted or irrelevant portions of the text trimmed away to focus on the portion deemed most important?

3) “How is the authority of Scripture envisioned?” The first two questions come into play here. Do certain portions carry more authority than other portions, and how much interpretive flexibility is allowed? How are competing interpretations of Scripture reconciled?

4) “What kind of hermeneutic is employed in approaching the Bible?” In this question Siker seems most interested in the convictions the theologian brings to the text.

5) “What is the relationship between the Bible and Christian ethics?” Siker treats this question as an expansion of question 2, but it would seem to be a synthesis of all four preceding questions.

Charles Cosgrove has provided us with extended studies on five common “rules” used in applying Scripture to moral issues. He inquires first about the purpose (spirit) behind the specifics (letter) of a Biblical teaching, and then about the degree of similarity or difference between the ancient context and the modern context. The third rule gives a special value to those Scriptural teachings which run counter to the ancient culture. The fourth rule separates between Scriptural statements on faith and practice and those statements which are within the purview of the natural sciences. More broadly, he studies the idea that Scriptural authority resides in the main points of the text – its scope – and not in the incidentals of the text.

In Cosgrove’s fifth rule, the interpreter has a responsibility to consider all reasonable interpretive options and choose the one which is most moral. Within this section he discusses how this rule exposes “one’s judgments to scrutiny and criticism,” and causes the interpreter to

take “greater responsibility for one’s interpretations.” (p 156) This final point should be basic to all methods of interpretation and application. All hermeneutics should allow for scrutiny and criticism, and all who interpret should be aware of their responsibility for the interpretive choices they make.

In his book, *The Good Book*, Peter Gomes approaches Scripture as one who loves and respects the sacred text, but also as one who knows Scriptural oppression as an African American descendant of slaves and as a gay man. His book consists of an intricate story in which he reconciles the ethical parts of Scripture with the parts which are not ethical – or which have been used unethically – to oppress women, gays, Jews and slaves of a darker race. His book forces the reader to confront the ethics of using Scripture to justify oppression, which makes for an interesting counterpoint to Cosgrove’s study.

Siker’s questions, Cosgrove’s rules and Gomes’ answers illustrate the complexity of Scripture application within the various faith communities, and thus the impossibility of producing a study which proposes definitive applications in church policy. No one scholar, however skillful a theologian or diplomat, can hope to provide satisfactory applications for more than a few sectors of Christianity (or Judaism). And well-trained Bible scholars often are painfully inept at the process of applying the ancient texts in modern contexts.

This study presupposes the authority of the Canon of Scripture within various faith communities without precisely defining that authority (cf. Cosgrove, p 10). Therefore the texts as we have them will be the primary object of study. The primary methods of study will be rhetorical and canonical. Interest will be paid to how each text functions in its textual position – its position within the paragraph or chapter, its position within the book, and its position within the larger Canon. Local context will be most important, but canonical issues cannot be left out of these studies, for the faithful use these texts within the larger context of the Canon.

This book will take only marginal interest in redactional and historical issues in the Hebrew Scriptures. Both of these areas of study are highly speculative, and therefore highly contested, with no clear outcome apparent. Some historical and redactional context is relevant and usable, but the reader must keep in mind the highly subjective nature of these contexts. Context for the Hebrew Scriptures is problematic due to sparse surviving texts and gaping lacunae in historical and literary contexts. For the New Testament the historical and literary contexts are much better documented, and therefore more relevant.

The reader should remain aware that as we study the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures, we are studying literature, not sociological documentation. We are told those things which interested the authors, which rarely allow us to reconstruct the social contexts which often interest us. Except where ancient behaviors impact the archaeological record, we are dependant on and limited to the surviving literature. We know a great deal about how the authors and editors felt about various behaviors and relationships, but little about how they actually did these things that mattered so much to them. We are given very little information on how they negotiated marriage contracts, regulated prostitutes, worked out levirate disputes, etc. We have almost no meaningful statistical information. We can study their attitudes, but not their actual behaviors.

The canonical reader should always keep in mind the size, prominence and context of key Biblical texts on any topic. Short bits, interpreted out of context, cannot be given the same weight as longer passages or short passages with significant context. Likewise, topics covered in a variety of contexts and literary forms will produce a fuller understanding than topics which depend on a single reference or context. Even the most careful Bible scholar is liable to misunderstand isolated texts or topics covered in a single context only. When the canon of Scripture is used as an authority, its texts should be weighed and not merely counted.

Of course, there will be times when this book will go beyond presenting “raw material” and the thoughts of the book’s author on application will be apparent. However, these applications are suggestions, not demands. Critical reading is welcomed – of this book and of any other book or article on these topics.

Finally, it would be premature to derive applications from the studies in this book alone. The claims of these studies require evaluation by other Bible scholars – whose biases should not be assumed to be less than my own. Bias is endemic and is best recognized early in any controversial subject. After a certain period of reflection and critique these observations may be used with confidence as raw material when working through policies relevant to these studies.