

“Same-Sex’ Relationships in the Bible

“Our Story Too....Reading the Bible with ‘New Eyes’” - Part 3

The stories of two prominent same-sex couples in the Scriptures provide gay men and lesbians with Biblical models of committed love in stressful circumstances.

Ruth and Naomi

The Book of Ruth is a romantic novel but not about romance between Ruth and Boaz. Naomi is actually the central character, and Ruth is the "redeemer/hero." Boaz' relationship with Ruth, far from being romantic, is a matter of family duty and property.

This story contains the most moving promise of relational fidelity between two persons in all of the bible: "And Ruth said, 'Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whether thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God". (Ruth 1:16)

Although used in heterosexual marriage ceremonies for years, this is a vow between two women! When their husbands die in battle, Ruth makes this vow to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Ruth marries Boaz, a close relative, and redeems Naomi's place in her own family, also bearing a child for Naomi. Did Ruth and Naomi have a lesbian relationship? There's no way to know, but it is clear the two women had a lifelong, passionate, committed relationship celebrated in Scripture.

United in a Covenant of Love...David and Jonathan

Another story, that of David and Jonathan, occurs in a time when male warrior/lovers were common and considered noble.

This tragic triangle of passion, jealousy and political intrigue between Saul, Jonathan and David, leads to one of the most direct expressions of same-sex love in the Bible: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women." (II Samuel 1:26)

The author is clearly attuned to David's classic male beauty (I Samuel 16:12) in this story of love and loyalty marked by romance (I Samuel 18:1-5), secret meetings (I Samuel 20:1-23; 35-42), kissing and weeping (I Samuel 20:41), refusal to eat (I Samuel 28:32-34), and the explicit warrior/lover covenant which David keeps after Jonathan's death (I Samuel 20:12-17; 42).

One cannot read this account without discerning that Jonathan was the love of David's life. Centuries of homophobic Biblical interpretations have kept them in the closet too long!

Homosexuality and the Bible: Some Important Questions

Is that all there is? A few prophecies about barrenness and eunuchs and only two same-sex couples? There is more, and scholars need to explore the possibilities:

- Are the eunuchs in the Joseph story (Genesis 39-45) and the Book of Esther also gay, residing in royal courts, and rescuing God's leaders?
- In the parable of the woman who has lost a coin (Luke 15), she had ten and lost one. Are gays and lesbians a lost coin joyfully rediscovered in our day? Gays and lesbians are now

- estimated to be ten percent of the population. Are they a tithe of humanity? Are they the leaven in the loaf of every culture?
- A centurion petitions Jesus for the healing of a servant who is dear to him (Luke 7). The Greek word in Matthew 8 is pais meaning "slave boy", which commonly described a homosexual relationship in those times. Why did Jesus praise the faith of the centurion but not condemn his lifestyle?
 - Paul, the apostle, had no sympathy for heterosexuals who couldn't control their sexual desires. At the same time, his stormy relational life was centered around men, such as Timothy, Barnabas and Silas. Were his tirades against co-workers and churches, and his tireless missionary zeal partly a way to suppress his homosexuality?
 - In the story of the rich young ruler (Mark 10), "Jesus looking upon him loved him." What is the connection of embodied spirituality and this "love" for a needy stranger? What studies have been done about the eight times Jesus was said to "love" someone? How was Jesus' particular "love for individuals related to his sexuality?
 - What of Lydia (Acts 16), the independent, Gentile businesswoman, seller of purple and the first European Christian? There is no mention of her husband, or children, yet she is noted to have led a women's group to whom Paul preached. Was Lydia a lesbian?
 - the color purple is often used in connection with royalty, or suffering and passion, or transformation and magic. It is the color which Jesus wore to the cross. Does the color purple also have gay and lesbian connotations in the bible and in Christian liturgical tradition?

Also See:

"Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with 'New Eyes'"
(Part 1)

And

"Our Story Too...Reading the Bible with 'New Eyes'" - Part 2:
"The GLBT Family in the Bible...Following the Work of Jesus"

Footnotes to "Our Story Too..."

1) Consultation of the National Council of Churches of Christ, USA, on "Biblical Issues and Homosexuality," Unpublished papers, 1987. Six infamous passages in the Bible are used against gays and lesbians-all of which must be taken out of context when directed against them. A thorough, yet concise, commentary on these passages is provided in the pamphlet, *Homosexuality: Not a Sin, Not a Sickness*, by Rev. Donald Eastman, referenced below.

2) This section, "Same-Sex Relationships," is indebted to Tom Horner's *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1978.

3) This section, "Important Questions," is indebted to Judy Grahn's *Another Mother Tongue*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984.

Further Reading:

The following sources are recommended for those wishing to more carefully study related issues:

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 2000.

Goss, Robert E and Mona West, ed *Take Back the Word*. Pilgrim Press, 2000

Boswell, John. *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality: gay people in Western Europe from the beginning of the Christian era to the fourteenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Countryman, Louis William. *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*. Morehouse Publishing, 2001.

Heyward, Carter. *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic As Power and the Love of God*. Harpercollins 1989..