

# RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

James E. Miller

November, 2006

Chapter 1

Raw Material, an Introduction

Pages, 1-6

## Raw Material, an Introduction

The following essays are presented as raw material for various faith traditions which use the Bible as a source of authority. Sexuality is the subject, and it is a sensitive subject. In this controversial subject there is a need for basic clarity on the meanings of relevant Biblical texts before those texts are applied in church policy. It is impossible to keep modern contexts from coloring our understanding of the 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 or one scholar cannot hope to satisfy the broad spectrum of denominations and congregations. 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 1997:895)

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 mind-set 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 a raw material. But the ideal is problematic, for the Bible scholar is a modern individual working from modern contexts which influence the reading of the ancient texts. Usually the scholar is affiliated with a religious tradition which requires particular readings, and secular culture will also affect 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 into the foreign world, in which the Biblical texts were produced, and as such does bring to the church community important information concerning the messages intended by the writers and editors of the Biblical text. But the focus on the ancient context often means the Biblical 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 modern church communities as any other lay person. For 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 then the church community, or its hierarchy, steps in and usually moves in accord with its own agenda 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 alters the literal application of the passage in the modern church (e.g. the criticism of braided hair in 1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3). In other cases the literal text may be applied directly (e.g. the practice of footwashing, often in connection with the Lord's Supper, based on John 13:12-15). Sometimes an application is not considered 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 by other faith communities (Catholic veneration of Mary seems, theologically, to hang on one Biblical line, “born of a woman,” (Gal 4:4; cf. Bur viii). 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.

Please recognize that sexual minorities and other excluded individuals and groups are likely to choose the application strategies which provide them 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 very churches which exclude them. A mirror is 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 church communions authority comes from tradition (church fathers, church councils, saints, etc) and from leaders who lay claim to apostolic succession. These church leaders often hold the Scripture-based authority because they are accepted as the authoritative interpreters of the word. Also these leaders are called upon to make determinations beyond the scope of the Scriptural text. Again variety characterizes the applications of Scripture to the many policy points in these communions. The variety is not only between communions but also between the patriarchates or dioceses within a communion. Only occasionally is this methodology systematized in a monograph (e.g. Webb) so that the reader can observe the inner working of churches which follow tradition and other non-biblical authorities, sometimes in preference to Biblical teachings.

Also a number of influential theologians have used the Bible's authority in ways which seem independent of any particular tradition, though they intersect at a number of points. 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 of herself or himself. Siker asks (pp. 3-4)

- 1) "What Biblical texts are used?" Are particular sections of the Bible favored, or particular authors or books? Other 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 the 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 more 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 teachings, 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. Fifth, the interpreter has a responsibility to consider all reasonable interpretative 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 interpretation” (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 the 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 descendent 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 Scriptural application within the various churches, 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. And well-trained Biblical scholars often are painfully inept at the process of applying the ancient text in modern contexts.

This study presupposes the authority of the Canon of the Scripture within the churches without defining that authority (cf. Cosgrove, p10). 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 Church uses 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, but the reader must keep in mind the highly subjective nature of these contexts. Context for the Hebrew Scriptures is usually 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 interest the authors, which rarely allow us to reconstruct the social models which often interest us. Except where ancient behaviors have an impact on the archaeological record, we are dependent on and limited by the surviving literature. So, we know a great deal about how the authors and editors felt about various behaviors and relationships, but little about how they 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 subjects in a variety of contexts and literary forms produce a fuller understanding than subjects 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 weighted and not merely counted.

Of course there will be times when this book will go beyond presenting “raw material” and the thoughts of this book’s author on church applications will be apparent. However, in most cases these applications are suggestions, not demands. Critical reading is welcomed.

Finally, it would be premature to derive church applications from the studies in this book alone. The claims of these studies require evaluation by fellow 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 the churches may use some of these observations with confidence as raw material when working through church policy issues relevant to these studies.